

Reincarnated as a **SWORD**



WRITTEN BY
Yuu Tanaka
ILLUSTRATED BY
Llo

13
NOVEL



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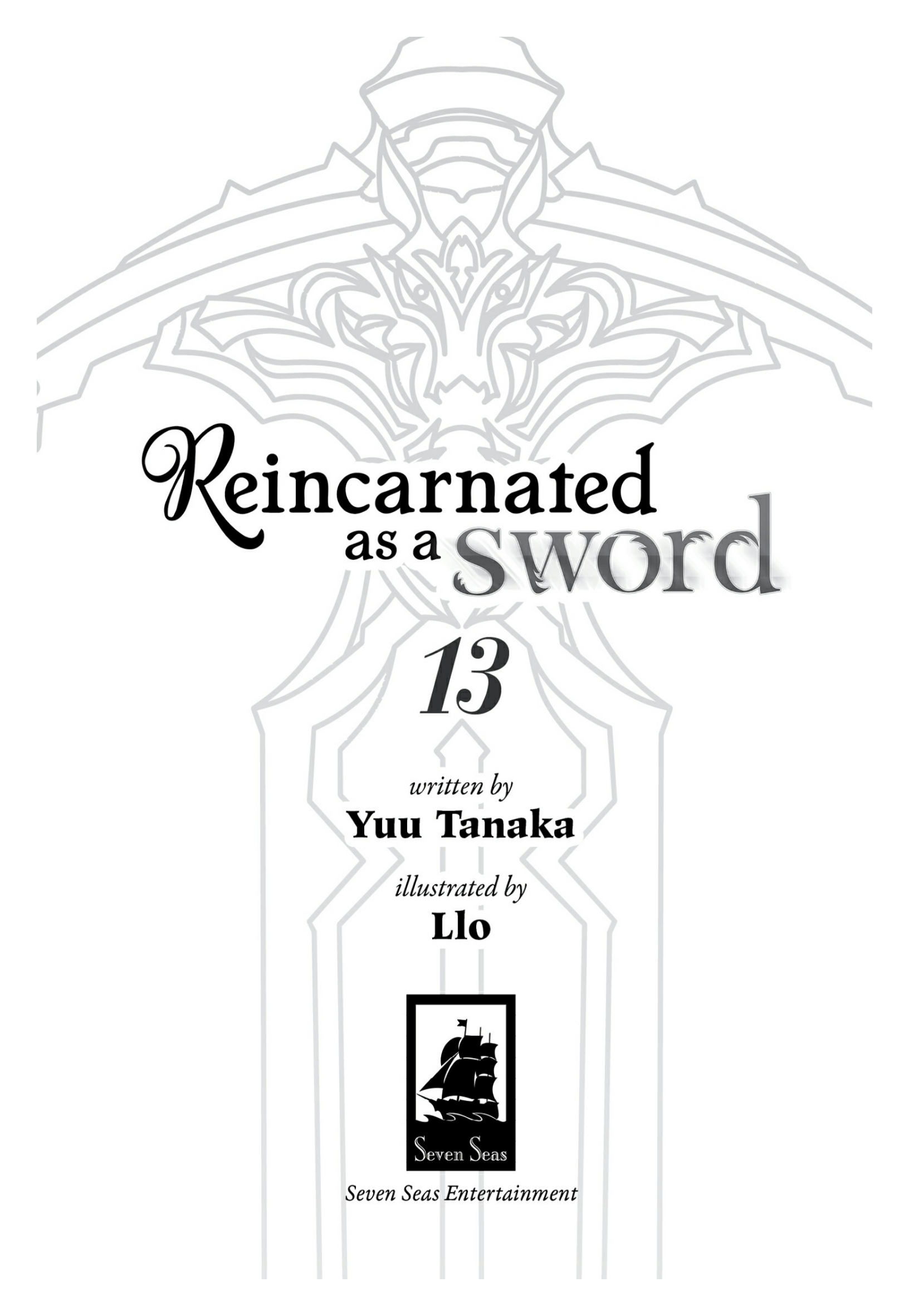
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Reincarnated
as a **Sword** 13







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Yuu Tanaka

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Llo



Seven Seas Entertainment

Tensei Shitara Ken Deshita Vol. 13
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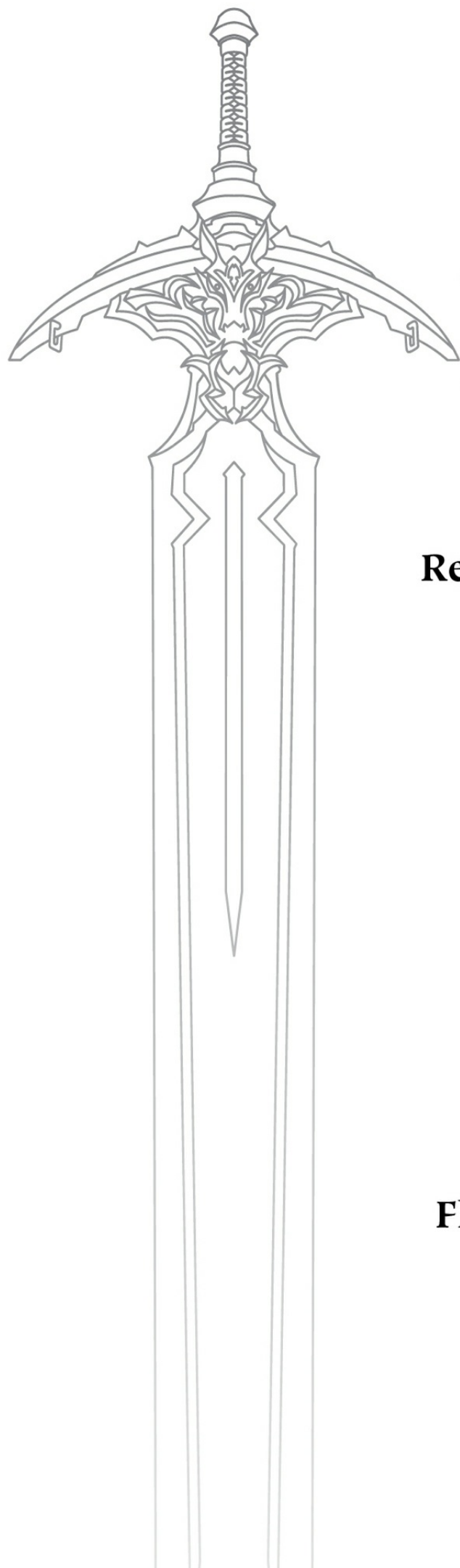
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digital editions is available from Digital Manager CK Russell
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EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis
ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER: Adam Arnold
PUBLISHER: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 978-1-68579-641-9
Printed in Canada
First Printing: November 2023
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



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Flight Attendant Fran

Chapter 1:

Alessa Homecoming

“THERE IT IS! Alessa!”

“Woof!”

At last, the familiar walls of Fort Town Alessa came into view. We’d gotten sick of them back when we took up quests here, but seeing them again brought a deep feeling of nostalgia.

It feels like it’s been forever.

The town was special to me. After all, it was the first town I had entered upon reincarnating.

Only a few people were lined up to enter Alessa’s gates. It looked lonely after the hustle and bustle of the capital, but this was business as usual for Alessa—because the shadow of war had yet to fall over the city. Intimidating soldiers weren’t passing through the gates, and there weren’t any caravans out to make a profit from the war economy.

Business as usual. Alessa was just as we left it.

Still, I’d thought they’d be on alert by now, since Raydoss had invaded...

We might cause trouble if we land right in front of the gates.

“Hm. Take us down, Jet.”

“Woof!”

We landed a little ways from Alessa and walked towards it. The few merchants and adventurers were startled and stared at us in shock. Jet must have scared them. Even if he was only the size of a large dog, he still looked like a wolf.

But the gatekeeper reacted differently from the others.

“What’s this?” he said in a friendly tone. “Hey, it’s Fran!”

“Hm?”

“Back in Alessa, I see.”

“Good to see you, Delt!” said Fran.

It was Delt the gatekeeper. We had befriended him while we were still in Alessa. Fran seemed to remember him, which was impressive, considering she’d forgotten who Cruise was when they met again in the fighting tournament.

Fran never forgot a strong opponent; if you could hold your own against her, she’d remember you for life. But she also remembered people who were friendly to her, like Delt. Even if their interactions were limited to short conversations as Fran passed through the gates, these were enough for her to remember him.

As for Cruise, he hadn’t been very strong, and he wasn’t friendly enough with her to leave an impression. He was good-looking, sure, but nothing about him stood out.

“Good to have you back,” Delt said, smiling.

“Thanks,” Fran smiled back. The town where she first became an adventurer held a special place in her heart.

“Let’s see some identification, then.”

“Hm.”

“Thank you very—whoa, whoa, whoa! Fran, this is...” Delt’s eyes widened when he saw Fran’s guild card.

“Hm?”

Delt looked at her, then to the card, then back at her again, as if making sure that the card really belonged to her. Finally, realization settled in and he returned the guild card.

“Th-this is the real deal. This *is* your card! How did you get to B Rank so quick?”

“I got promoted in the capital.”

“The capital,” Delt exclaimed, then paused. “I hear there were riots down

there. Countless casualties. There were rumors of the palace being destroyed... that the capital was annihilated, even.”

Details of the destruction hadn’t made it to Alessa. The flood of information probably made it difficult to discern fact from fiction.

Upon remembering those awful events at the capital, Fran hung her head. She’d tasted both victory and defeat there, and what had happened couldn’t be boiled down to a single word.

“A lot of people died,” she said.

“So things really *are* bad in the capital.”

“Hm...”

“Still, I’m glad you made it out in one piece. Welcome to Alessa.”

“Thanks.”

Alessa looked the same as ever. The battle with Raydoss had yet to change the atmosphere.

First, we’ll go to the guild.

“Got it.”

“Woof!”

The Adventurers’ Guild was also just as we left it. It was livelier now, filled with more adventurers, but maybe it was just a busy season.

Fran pushed the doors open with great force and stepped inside. “Excuse me.”

That’s...not quite how you open doors.

All eyes were immediately on Fran. Some were estimating how strong she was while others appeared shocked. Most of them remembered who she was, though, and I could feel their respect and familiarity for her. This was as warm a welcome as adventurers could give.

A few tried to give her trouble, but the other adventurers talked them out of it.

“Remember the tournament in Ulmutt—”

“Third place—”

News of her promotion to B Rank had yet to be widely known. The capital was quite a distance away from Alessa, and I doubted that adventurers would go out of their way to spread the word. Things would’ve been different if she’d become an A Rank, of course.

Still, a lot of people knew about the tournament in Ulmutt and how she’d come in third place. The man who had tried to mess with her *immediately* took a step back. Placing in the tournament wasn’t something you could do with blind luck.

“Welcome,” the girl at the counter said. “Umm, are you an adventurer, young lady?”

We didn’t remember seeing this receptionist. She was probably hired after Fran had left Alessa, and here she was, startled at the appearance of this little girl.

“Hm,” was all Fran said.

“A-and how may I help you today?”

“I want access to the Demon Wolf’s Garden. How do I apply?”

“Excuse me, the Demon Wolf’s Garden? That place is an A-Rank haunt, and you have to be at least a B-Rank adventurer to go there.”

“I know.”

“Oh? Then you should know that you can’t go there.”

Most of the adventurers couldn’t hold back their laughter upon hearing Fran’s request. She was only a D Rank when she left Alessa, after all, so of course they’d react like that.

“Here.”

“Your guild card? *Huuuuuh?!?*”

The receptionist reacted even more intensely than Delt had. Believing that the little girl in front of her was an adventurer was difficult enough, but her

breath was caught in her lungs when she finally noticed Fran's rank.

"No way," she muttered. "This little girl is a B Rank?"

The surrounding adventurers overheard her and started murmuring among themselves. They couldn't believe it, either. How could they? At this point, Fran was probably the highest-ranking adventurer in the room. She was something of a prodigy for making it to D Rank at her age, but they certainly didn't expect her to shoot up to B Rank over such a short period of time. Even the adventurers who knew her were baffled.

I started wondering when the situation would settle down. But then another figure walked out of the guild and clapped her hands. The hall immediately fell silent.

"All right everybody, calm down."

"Oh, Ms. Nell."

It was Nell, the first receptionist we met in Alessa.

"It's been a while, Fran," she said with a smile.

"Hm."

Nell cast a sharp glare at the junior receptionist. "Listen here. You can't go blurting out adventurers' information like that!"

"I-I'm sorry..."

"Really, now. This calls for correction."

The receptionist let out a pitiful whimper. I didn't even *want* to imagine what Nell's 'corrections' would be.

"We're honored to have you, Black Lightning Princess. Or is it Black Cat Saint now?"

"Black Lightning Princess is cooler," Fran pouted.

Nell giggled. "Black Lightning Princess Fran it is, then. Right this way, B Rank. The Guildmaster is calling for you."

"Okay."

News of our arrival had already reached the Guildmaster's ears. Good timing. We would need his permission to enter the haunt, anyway.

The other adventurers stared wide-eyed at Fran as we walked into the offices. Nell had vouched for her and they now knew she was the real deal, though they were still understandably shaken. Fran didn't look that much stronger than themselves, so even the veterans were stunned. They'd been left behind by a girl whom they had been fighting alongside just a few months ago.

"I hear you did a lot of good things in the capital."

Fran shook her head. "I didn't."

The battle in the capital left her with much to think about. Many people died, some of whom she was friendly with. She knew that there was only so much they could do to prevent further casualties, but you always wonder if there's something more you could've done.

Nell changed the subject once she saw Fran's response. The receptionist was a veteran at reading people's moods.

"But you did great at the tournament in Ulmutt! Congratulations on placing!"

"I couldn't win."

Fran had results to show, but not results she'd hoped for. The fights had been a valuable learning experience, but she still lost to Amanda in the worst possible way. Fran was the type to agonize over a loss rather than celebrate a victory, and Nell recognized that instantly as well.

She sighed, exasperated. "Oh, Fran. You're beginning to be more and more like Amanda..."

In the way she was addicted to battle? I was beginning to realize that being a blood knight was the norm for the elite fighters of this world. You really couldn't become strong without that kind of drive.

"Guildmaster, Fran's here to see you."

"Come in."

Klimt, Wood Elf and Guildmaster of Alessa, let us into his office. He was handsome as ever, an attractive man with intelligent eyes that exuded a

capable aura.

After Nell left the room, he motioned Fran over to a couch. Klimt took his seat across from her.

“It’s been a while.”

“Hm.”

“To think that you’ve gotten so strong,” he sighed. “Calling you a prodigy would be an understatement.”

Klimt wasn’t just talking about Fran’s rank, either. We couldn’t quite tell the last time we met him, but Klimt was strong. We knew that even without identifying him. But there was something other than his stats...a certain strength which seemed to emanate from his very core. Now Klimt felt the same thing coming from Fran. He let out an exasperated sigh after sizing her up. She was far stronger compared to when she left Alessa, and he knew that she had undergone many trials and tribulations to get there.

“In any case, congratulations on your promotion.” He wasn’t particularly jubilant as he congratulated her, though. If anything, he looked quite sullen. “To think that they’d use children as long as they’re strong...well, too late to do anything about that now.”

Klimt was against using young adventurers and putting them in dangerous situations. The guild in Alessa was unique in that it was the only one which had an entrance exam...an entrance exam designed to scare young would-be adventurers away by having Donadrond as an examiner. Still, the guild would then train the kids in the basics of adventuring.

It was a system which suited Amanda’s love for children as well as Klimt’s refusal to put children in danger. As far as he was concerned, Fran was teetering on the brink by pushing herself so hard.

“So why did you come back to Alessa?” he asked.

“To train.”

“To train? Do you really need to get any stronger?”

Fran just gave the stressed Guildmaster a nod. “Hm.”



“You’re a B Rank at twelve years old. You’ve already made top five in Adventurers’ Guild history.”

Top five? That means there were others who were greater than Fran. The guild must have had plenty of geniuses and outliers during its long history.

“Who’s number one?”

“Historically speaking?”

“Hm.”

“That would be The Battalion. The ancient S Rank adventurer who made it to A Rank when he was a young boy.”

“The Battalion? That’s his nickname?”

Weird nickname.

“Yes. Unfortunately, his nickname is all we have since our records don’t go back that far. We don’t know his powers, either. He became a B Rank at eight and an A Rank at ten. He was an S Rank by the time he was fourteen, or so the story goes.”

He sounded like a monster, to be honest. The word ‘prodigy’ didn’t even begin to describe his prowess. An S Rank would be on the same level as an elite fighter with a Godsword. Reaching that level of power at fourteen was hard to swallow.

“Wow.”

“Wow, indeed. But I think you’re quite amazing as well. Perhaps not on the same level as Battalion, but you are growing at a fast pace. And yet you still want to be stronger? Personally, I think you’re strong enough.”

Fran shook her head. “I’m not. I keep losing if I don’t get help in the middle of a fight. Besides, there’s a lot of people who are stronger than I am.”

Fran remembered the battle against the marquis and the clash of the titans that I’d recounted to her. She clenched her fists in frustration till her knuckles went white.

“Also,” she said, “I still can’t beat the Beast King or Urslars.”

Klimt sighed. "You've been through an eventful couple of months, I see. You *still* can't beat those two?" The Guildmaster's exasperation was growing. Unlike other top adventurers, Klimt wasn't all that battle-hungry, not that it exactly made him a paragon of common sense, either. "So what's this about your training?"

"I want to train in the Demon Wolf's Garden."

Klimt paused for a moment. "And...you plan to go there alone?"

"I'm B Rank. Shouldn't be a problem."

We knew that Klimt wouldn't immediately agree, but he couldn't stop Fran, since she was already of sufficient rank.

"I suppose, but...oh, fine." Klimt shrugged his shoulders in defeat. "You would've gone anyway, even without my permission, wouldn't you?"

"Of course," Fran nodded.

"Then there's no reason for me to stop you. But I will say that the area has been more dangerous than usual, so try not to push yourself too hard."

"All right."

"A rather quick response. That just makes you sound more dubious, you know."

Sorry, Klimt. There's no stopping Fran when she gets serious. But I'll take care of her, I promise!

"Please do not push yourself," he said.

"Hm."

Klimt heaved a long and heavy sigh. "And don't go north. Things are quite chaotic at the moment."

"Chaotic?"

The skirmishes with Raydoss had yet to be sorted out.

"Yes. We don't know how far Raydoss' spies have infiltrated."

Klimt proceeded to give a short explanation of the situation. "Firstly, an

adventurer called Jean du Vix has managed to repel Raydoss' invading force."

"I know."

"Right, you two are acquainted. He mentioned that when he submitted the diary you found."

The diary belonged to the dungeon master of the sky isle. Jean must have told the guild about Fran when he turned it in.

"As you well know, Jean is an excellent necromancer. His command of countless undead drove back Raydoss' advance forces, but they have yet to give up their efforts. They are still sending their forces sporadically. We can't let our guard down just yet."

Apparently, the enemy was conducting necromantic research during these sporadic invasions. They too were using undead soldiers, advancing their research to the experimental stage.

"They must be using undead to counteract Jean. Though their numbers don't compare to his undead, they're still significant enough to qualify as a threat...a great enough number that they could surround Jean and the adventurers tasked to protect him."

Donadrond, the guild's newbie instructor, was also sent to hold the line.

"You're not going? You can go all Calamity Klimt on them."

We learned about Klimt's nickname back in the capital. He had formed a contract with a Greater Spirit powerful enough to level a small city.

But Klimt only frowned and shook his head. "I'm not strong enough to deserve that nickname. Granted, my surroundings would be in shambles if I got serious."

Klimt wouldn't be mobilized for the skirmishes with Raydoss. He might not be able to fully control the Greater Spirit—in fact, he might even ultimately become a bigger threat to Alessa than Raydoss' forces.

"In any case, you have my permission to enter the Demon Wolf's Garden, but do not go anywhere *near* the Raydoss battlefield. Do I make myself clear?" Klimt sighed, massaging the bridge of his nose.

Guildmasters seemed to have it tough in any city. And Fran definitely added to Klimt's workload this time.

"And one more thing," he said. "I suggest you stay away from the noble district as well."

"The noble district?"

"There are some fools who hold a grudge against you."

"Me? Why?"

"Most of them are followers of Count Olmes. The same Count Olmes who was involved in a coup...!"

Count Olmes?

Baron Allsand's father...?

Of course, Fran had completely forgotten. He wasn't someone I wanted to remember either, so I guess it couldn't be helped.

Remember that idiot noble we took Essence of Falsehood from? That's Baron Allsand. His father is Count Olmes. He was an evil noble involved in the rebellion.

Oh, I see.

It was an awful summary, but it wasn't too far off the mark. Count Olmes was the father of Vice Knight Commander August Allsand, the previous owner of Essence of Falsehood. He worked under Marquis Aschtner, who had been taken over by Fanatix, to instigate a coup d'état.

We had yet to meet Count Olmes in person, but he didn't seem like the savory sort, judging by what we had heard about him. He held a considerable amount of power among the nobles in Alessa and stood opposed to the guild.

"Can't you arrest them?" asked Fran.

"The knights have already arrested the ones directly linked to Olmes."

Count Olmes should already have been arrested along with Marquis Aschtner. But Alessa was a small town and was situated quite a distance away from the capital. Orders from the capital took some time to get here.

All of Olmes' relatives in town had been arrested. The nobles under him were

currently under house arrest. His servants were free to walk around, though, and they could stir up some trouble if they saw Fran under the current circumstances.

“All part of the plan, really,” said the Guildmaster.

“You did it on purpose?”

“Yes. We received word about Marquis Aschtner’s dealings with Raydoss behind the scenes. There is a possibility of Raydossian agents contacting Olmes’ servants, so we’ve let them go free for the time being. We’ve actually prepared mansions for those placed under house arrest to keep a better eye on them.”

Fran was told to stay away from the noble district not because Klimt wanted to be considerate, but so that she wouldn’t disrupt their plan of drawing out Raydossian spies. Overseeing the nobles was usually the knights’ business, but knights and adventurers cooperated well in Alessa.

Alessa seemed to remain at peace, but...with the majority of nobles under house arrest, wouldn’t the town’s operations suffer?

Fran was thinking the same thing. “Will Alessa be okay with its viscount arrested?”

“Viscount?” Klimt wondered. “Oh, Count Olmes isn’t the viscount.”

“He’s not?”

Really? Then again, I guess the most powerful person in a given city didn’t necessarily have to be the viscount.

“The viscount of Alessa is a relative of the king.”

“The king? I didn’t know he had family here.”

“He does. He doesn’t wield that much influence, however. But such is the fate of the viscount of a border town.”

Klimt gave a short explanation of the viscount and his men so Fran wouldn’t get bored and fall asleep. Alessa was a complicated town. It was situated on the northern border against Raydoss and the Adventurers’ Guild was an important part of the city. But it wasn’t prosperous and lacked the glitz and glam of the capital.

The viscounty of Alessa was an office that was shirked among the nobles. That was how the current viscount got his title. He wasn't exceptionally talented, but he was wise enough to recognize that fact. He assigned the difficult tasks to his governor and Alessa's knight captain, Urs. He did his level best to fade into the background.

Alessa was at peace with the competent governor and knight captain in charge. It was only when Count Olmes came into the picture that problems started cropping up. He took advantage of his personal relationship with the viscount to install his family members and underlings into the town's operations. He even started complaining to the town's administrators. Marquis Aschtner and Fanatix were definitely the ones pulling his strings. With Olmes in Alessa, cooperating with Raydoss would be much easier.

If we hadn't crippled Baron Allsand, he would likely still be using Essence of Falsehood to throw Alessa into a state of chaos. At the time, we'd just took two of his Skills because he was irritating us, but it had turned out to be among the best plays we'd made so far.

"Things have been going all right here even without Count Olmes' subordinates around," said Klimt.

"I see."

"They've been quiet so far, but they might get heated if they see you. Now, I am a very busy man, and I would appreciate it if you do not add to my already terrible workload."

"Okay."

"And yet I worry," Klimt muttered as we left his office.

Let's stay away from the noble district so Klimt doesn't die from overwork.

Back in the capital, Erianthe had cried when she saw the amount of work she had to do by the time Fran left. We would try not to let it happen again this time.

Next stop, the library.

Yeah, we'll read up on the Demon Wolf's Garden!

After checking in with Klimt, we headed to the guild's library for reference material on the Garden. Apparently, its monsters had grown much stronger compared to when I was last there. Going in without information would be dangerous.

We looked around for a while and finally found a book with the details we needed. Alessa did a fair amount of research and observation on its nearby haunt.

All right, try to read along as best you can, Fran.

"Hm."

I wondered how long she could stay awake. She was an elite adventurer now, so she needed to be able to read through resources at the very least. Fran flipped the pages and I started reading them.

The first subject was the monsters that lived in the Garden. Owing to the Demon Wolf's Garden's fluctuating mana, the types of monsters that spawned there weren't fixed. The random nature of the spawns meant there was a nonzero chance of encountering a rare monster.

That being said, the materials you got from the haunt, as well as its ecosystem, were randomized. This made dealing with the monster population difficult. An ordinary haunt had a fixed ecosystem and fixed monster spawns, and you could create reliable systems to deal with them. Meanwhile, you never knew what you were in for at the Demon Wolf's Garden until you got there, thereby increasing its threat ranking.

There was a list of all the monsters sighted in the haunt to date, but the list was so long that I gave up on reading it. The types and species that spawned in the Garden were so multitudinous that they had nothing in common with each other.

The haunt's spawn cycle was also accelerated by the Withering Forest encircling it. The forest actually made it easier for the haunt to gain mana, which in turn made it easier for the monsters within the Garden to grow. Their increased growth rate led to turf wars, which helped victorious monsters evolve and become area bosses. But powerful monsters needed more mana to survive, and they couldn't leave the haunt as long as the Withering Forest stood in their

way. There were records of aerial monsters flying over the forest, but they couldn't quite escape its mana-sapping effects. Monsters steered clear of the forest as much as they could.

The guild had also sent expedition parties to observe the haunt, discovering that the monsters replaced one another at a rapid rate. In a usual haunt, a single powerful monster could rule an area for decades. In the Demon Wolf's Garden, however, monsters as powerful as C-Threats were replaced at high frequency.

Even A-Threats found it difficult to live in the Garden for very long. A monster's natural mana recovery was far slower in the Demon Wolf's Garden, perhaps from the effect of the Withering Forest or perhaps from some other, unknown factor. In any case, they needed an external source of mana in order to survive, hence the frequent turf wars: they had to kill each other to survive or wither away and die. However, if a monster got too strong, other monsters stayed away from it, making hunting even more difficult. Their own mana economy would be worse, too, to the point that their own mana expenditure would so weaken them that weaker monsters could kill them.

The same effect applied to humans, but there were no observable side effects in the short term. Long-term studies were difficult to conduct. After all, living in an A-Rank haunt for a long period of time was hard enough to begin with.

Was I under these effects when I was in the Garden? To be honest, I couldn't tell. It was the first place I'd awakened in upon arriving in this world so I didn't have any points of reference. I regenerated what mana I lost by way of absorbing crystals, too. My mana economy got better because I leveled up after leaving the Garden.

There are lots of entries on monsters which spawn in the Garden, but nothing here about a pedestal...

The pedestal at the center of the Demon Wolf's Garden was of the utmost importance to me, and yet the records made no mention of it. We asked the old librarian about it but even he had never heard about such a thing. There were certainly ruins in the center of the Garden, but nothing that resembled an altar.

What's going on here...?

Did it disappear?

I don't know. You would think that's what happened to it, though.

Didn't the mystery man tell me to come to the altar? Maybe not. He'd just said to come to the Demon Wolf's Garden. Had he even mentioned anything about an altar?

No use thinking about it now. We'll just have to see when we get there.

Hm!

I then read up on the Withering Forest, that fateful place where Fran and I met. The resources didn't reveal anything that I didn't already know, but there was one thing which stood out: the forest's mana-sapping effects seemed to emanate from the ground. After noticing that the withering effect was weaker in the air, the observation team decided to dig into the ground to see what would happen. The withering effect accelerated the deeper they went.

Digging deeper proved to be a challenge, however, as the team's mana was sapped dry and they had to rely on pure physical strength...which wasn't something you wanted to do with goblins lurking in the woods. Before long, the expedition was deemed too dangerous to continue.

Despite its withering effects, the forest was still home to numerous monsters and animals. There were goblins and other low-level monsters which didn't rely on mana to survive, as well as ordinary wildlife.

This was what made the Withering Forest so dangerous. Without access to their Skills and magic, low-level adventurers could easily fall to goblins. If you were an elite adventurer, however—like Fran—the forest wouldn't prove much of a problem. Even so, I didn't want to tarry there for long if we could help it. I was still traumatized by the things that happened the last time I was there. Still, we might need to set up a base of operations there if the monsters in the Demon Wolf's Garden proved too strong.

I then felt someone approaching us. They were clearly headed for Fran, but they didn't seem hostile to her.

"Yo. That you, Fran?"

“Hm? Who are you?”

“Hey, come on! Don’t tell me you forgot about me! It’s *me!*”

“You...?” Fran had completely forgotten about the man who was so casual with her.

He looked at her with shock and disappointment.

She just tilted her head. “And who are you?”

The man let out a nervous laugh. “I’m Krad, leader of Dragon Roar! We explored a dungeon together, remember?”

“Uhhh.”

We had indeed explored a dungeon together with Krad the adventurer. He used to be a thuggish young adventurer who picked a fight with Fran when they first met, but he’d changed much since our last encounter. That quest gave him a potent taste of reality, and it ended with him admitting Fran’s strength.

Unfortunately, Fran had completely forgotten who he was. He had been very rude to her, after all, and he was weak to boot. Still, I was quite impressed with the progress he had made. He was much stronger compared to before.

Name: Krad

Age: 23

Race: Human

Class: Spearman

Level: 27/99

Life: 148, Magic: 88, Strength: 86, Agility: 74

Skills: Transport 2, Acrobatics 4, Danger Sense 3, Hunger Resistance 3, Presence Sense 1, Punch Mastery 1, Spear Arts 2, Spear Mastery 5, Threaten 3, Climb 3, Poison Resistance 1, Spirit Manipulation

Equipment: Fine Steel Spear, Armor Lizard Mail, Stone Bull Gauntlets, Armor Lizard Boots, Rock Spider Mantle, Antidote Ring

Krad had gained seven levels and increased his Spear Arts and Spear Mastery. He also had Poison Resistance now, a Skill which must've required some hard training to acquire. As far as D Ranks went, he was at the top.

"Hmm?"

Fran, you can't just keep quizzically looking at him like that! He'll find out that you actually forgot! You have to throw him off somehow!

"You've gotta be kidding me," he mumbled. "Y-you really don't remember...?"

Fran! Remember that guy who picked a fight with you when we went to the Spider's Nest? The spearman you beat up when you sparred? The leader of the adventurer punks who almost got killed?

"You beat the crap out of me back then after I picked a fight with you! I'm the leader of those idiots who stepped on the teleport trap!"

"Oh yeah, I guess you *were* there!"

Finally!

"You're the guy that cried after Amanda put an iron claw on him!"

"That's what you remember?!"

"Quiet, punk! This is a library!" the guild librarian snapped at Krad for being so loud, and did it with such emphasis that he was forced to comply.

"Urgh...!"

"So what do you want?" asked Fran.

"Uhhh, nothing, really. Ha ha..."

Krad was probably expecting a "It's been a long time!" or "Good to see you!" But he was deflated after seeing Fran's initial response. He slinked away from the library in a state of loneliness.

I'm really sorry, Krad. But we don't have enough time to catch up with you. Keep at it, though. You're doing great.

"Leaving so soon?"

“Hm.”

“I shee,” said the receptionist.

“Hm?”

We went to the reception area to say goodbye to Nell and found that the receptionist from earlier had red marks on her cheeks.

“Don’t worry about her,” said Nell. “She just needed a little punishment.”

I didn’t know cheeks could *be* so red. Nell’s punishment was so harsh that the other adventurers were silent.

“We’re really sorry about that,” Nell said with a terrifying smile.

“Very very shorry.”

Hang in there, newbie.

It was the day after Klimt gave us permission to enter the Demon Wolf’s Garden. We were off to the market to buy provisions before heading out. Our supplies were drained after giving food away back in the capital. I didn’t think Fran would actually give her curry away like that. That went to show how much she wanted to help the people there.

While we weren’t *completely* spent, I still wanted to replenish our supplies. Curry was Fran’s primary motivator, after all.

We’ll stock up on vegetables. Hunting our own meat would be faster.

“Hm.”

Alessa’s market probably didn’t have that much monster meat in stock, anyway...or so I suspected. But when we got to the market, there was a lot more than I’d imagined.

“What meat is this?”

“Oh, you’ve got an eye for meat, young lady! This is the rib of a gullinbursti, a D-Threat monster!”

“What about this one?”

“Cockatrice breast! Never worked, very tender!”

We had worked with gullinbursti before; it was one of the ingredients in our competition curry bread back in Bulbola. The golden boar monster was strong and delicious. I didn’t know they had those around these parts. In fact, there was a veritable variety of monster meats at the butcher store. Maybe it’d be better for us to just stock up here.

The shopkeeper sensed Fran’s question in the air and answered it before she could ask.

“These are all Lady Amanda’s leftovers, you see.”

“Amanda? Is she in town?”

“Yes. And she’s been out hunting in the areas near Alessa.”

Amanda sold the results of her hunt to the guild, which in turn sold it to the merchants of Alessa.

“Amanda’s not at the frontlines?”

“Apparently, an adventurer called Jean is out fighting so Amanda could stay and protect the city. There are fewer troublemakers with her around, too.”

“Really?”

“Of course. Things have been a little hectic with the war going on, but the knights have been so reliable lately that we haven’t had much in the way of problems.”

The brigade was doing a lot better without August using it for his own ends.

“The knights have been so polite lately, and the crooked nobles have finally been stripped of their rank by the king. Apparently, they were involved in a coup against His Highness. Trade has been so much easier without Count Olmes and Baron Allsand. We never liked those two to begin with.”

Despite being involved in a rebellion, Count Olmes acted more like a small-time mob boss than an evil villain. He used his money and power to increase shop fees and demand cuts. With him gone, small shops could breathe a sigh of relief.

I guess Alessa's feeling the effects of what happened in the capital.

Hm.

Now that we were stocked up on meat, spices, seasonings, and vegetables, we headed to our next destination.

"Fran? Is that you?"

"Hm. Long time no see, Randell."

Randell was the merchant who gave Fran a ride to Alessa in his cart. His store was, as always, a real mess of inventory.

"To think that the great Black Lightning Princess would visit my store!"

"You know about that?"

"Information is the merchant's weapon of choice," said Randell with a laugh. "And I happen to know you personally, so I'm a little bit invested in any news about you."

"I see."

He welcomed her with a warm smile. His ears would more readily prick up at news about an acquaintance. "I didn't think the little girl I met back then would get so strong so fast. Personally, I'm just relieved that you haven't changed."

"But I *have* changed," Fran insisted. "I'm a lot stronger than before."

"That's not the change I'm talking about. I mean your heart, your personality. Some adventurers get cocky when they get promoted."

"Uh-huh?" Fran was never one to look down on others no matter what rank she was at. But I bet if you were cocky as a low rank, promotions would only magnify the problem.

"So what brings you here today? I doubt you came all the way to Alessa just to say hello. Not that I wouldn't appreciate that."

"I want some pots and cutlery."

"Pots and cutlery?"

"Hm."

We had donated most of our cooking tools away with our food back in the capital. Even if we were to make fresh batches to replace them, we wouldn't have anywhere to store them. I thought Randell would have the inventory available to fulfill our demand.

"How many do you need?"

"A lot."

"Umm..."

"Like, *a lot* a lot."

Eventually, Randell got Fran to tell him the size and number of pots that she wanted. His countenance fell, then. It didn't seem like he had enough in his store to meet her demand. I couldn't blame him. We needed two hundred plates just to start.

"Mind if I ask the other stores?" he asked.

"No, but aren't they your rivals?"

"Connections are more profitable for small shops like ours."

"Go for it, then. I'll buy whatever you've got."

"Okay! Pots and cutlery, coming right up!"

Randell offered Fran a seat and a drink before bolting out of his store to get his neighbors in on Fran's deal. What a nice guy! Yeah, it'd be wrong to ask for a discount—it'd be better to just pay them in full.

But what if a customer were to walk in right now? Were we supposed to entertain them? Fran had had experience dealing with customers before, and everything had a price tag on it so I was confident that she would be fine.

"Excuse me..." Oops. And there we go—a customer.

Never mind, I take it back. Fran might be better than before, but she was still herself! We should probably wait for Randell to come back. But our customer was just a rabbit beastgirl. Maybe she just wanted some vegetables?

As I panicked about what to do next, our customer set down her backpack and started taking cups and plates out of it.

“You’re not a customer?”

“Oh no,” the girl said. “I’m from the general store next door. Randell told me to bring these to you.”

The rabbit girl turned out to be one of Randell’s merchant friends.

“So you’re the Black Lightning Princess? Y-you really *are* evolved!”

“Hm.”

“I never thought I’d get to sell my wares to the princess herself...! I can’t wait to tell all my friends!”

I wasn’t expecting her to show any respect because of Fran’s age, but she was legendary among the beastmen for being an evolved Black Cat. The girl even threw in some extra plates as a bonus.

More merchants followed suit, entering Randell’s store to leave their pots and cutlery. One of them even went out of their way to load up a trolley full of their wares. The Black Lightning Princess was apparently famous among merchants, to the point that some of them brought their entire stock of pots to sell to her for a huge profit.

Members of the Lucille Trade Association also showed up. The LTA was a trade association operated out of Bulbola, and they had a small branch here in Alessa. I guess they had branch offices in all the important towns of Granzell.

A total of over ten stores participated in fulfilling Fran’s demand, and even though she was asking for a lot, her demand was fulfilled.

“That’s a lot of cooking utensils,” Randell said. “Are you sure it isn’t too much?”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

“Glad to hear it.”

He was worried that he had gotten carried away with the pots and plates. There were a lot of them to be sure. But it fit our purposes perfectly. If anything, we were fortunate to have been given bulk prices for them.

I can’t wait to see what I’ll cook up next!

“Thanks again, Randell. See you around.”

“Of course! Good luck out there, Fran!”

A line of drool trickled from the edge of Fran’s mouth. Seeing the pots and plates made her imagine the food that would go in them. She thanked Randell before bowing out.

“We have plates now. Lots of them.”

And the ingredients to go with them. We’ll cook once we’re outside of town.

“Hm!”

We used to employ the kitchen of whatever inn we were staying in, but now I could cook whatever I wanted with magic. If anything, cooking outside of town gave me a little bit more freedom.

Of course, I wasn’t about to cook in the middle of the Demon Wolf’s Garden. With all the monsters crawling around there, it’d be too dangerous to stay in one place for too long. The Withering Forest was also out of the question, since magic didn’t work there.

Which leaves the spot just outside the Withering Forest. We’ll cook there.

“Sure.”

As we were talking, we turned a corner, away from the gates—we had to. After all...

Five?

Yeah. They’re very weak, though...

...we’d felt eyes watching us soon after we left the general store. I thought Fran just caught their attention and so we paid them no heed and hurried on to our destination. However, the eyes persisted and started following us. There was a certain amount of animosity in the gaze.

I don’t feel good just leaving it unchecked. Let’s see what they want.

Hm.

“Woof!”

Fran was famous now, and there were a lot of people who valued whatever information they could get on her. Being watched was an ordinary fact of public life. But immediately after we entered the back alleys, our observers came out of hiding and closed in on us.

“You there! Beastman!”

“Me?”

“That’s right! There’s five of us and only one of you! You best keep quiet if you know what’s good for you.”

I’ll admit, I was pretty surprised for a few reasons. For starters, the ones who accosted us were untrained civilians. Lesser nobles, if you wanted Identify’s classification of them, but they were untrained all the same. They had combat Skills like Sword and Bow Mastery, but these were only there for aristocratic formality. The five men had never been in a real fight before, and it showed: they thought they could get by purely on numbers.

The oldest was thirty and the youngest twenty, and all five stood glaring at Fran. They were under the Resentful status effect, and she was probably the target of their resentment.

“Now give me the sword on your back.”

“Don’t try anything funny.”

“We’ll beat you up if you do!”

Are these guys for real?

They were unarmed and untrained and yet so confident! *Beat you up*, he said...? Honestly, they were worse than complete beginners. How were they expecting to beat an armed person without any weapons of their own?

Growing up in an environment where people waited on your every word, I guess they couldn’t imagine her fighting back.

“Is this girl really an adventurer? She doesn’t look strong at all.”

“She’s the one. One of our regular merchants told me so.”

“Can you trust him?”

One of our suppliers was the noble's informant, then. Ruined as they were, they *were* still nobles. They had servants everywhere.

"Don't just stand there! Give me that sword!"

"I don't want to," Fran said, growing more irritated with the aristocrats by the second.

"What? You dare refuse me?!"

"Well, yeah." Telling Fran to hand me over was a surefire way to get on her bad side.

The nobles sensed the pressure coming from her and started complaining to their leader.

"I-I thought you said we just needed to intimidate her! She's not budging!"

"Yeah! You said that beastman adventurers were no better than a noble's slaves!"

"That's just because she doesn't know who we are. We are followers of Count Olmes. I trust you know what that means, beastgirl."

"Olmes?" Fran repeated.

"Y-you don't know him?!"

Even I was shocked at how fast Fran had forgotten. She had a real knack for not remembering.

"This is why I hate these vulgar adventurers."

"To think that she doesn't know who Count Olmes is!"

"Enough! We are nobility. Yours is not to question why! Yours is but to do or die!"

The three oldest members were the cockiest by far. The two younger men, though...there was fear in their eyes, and they were already taking a step back. They were probably forced into coming with the older ones.

"A-are you sure we should be doing this? What if we get punished for this later...?"

“And why would it come to that?” one of the men scoffed. “She’s nothing but a lowly adventurer. There shouldn’t be a problem.”

“But there will be—”

“Hey, that girl is pretty strong. Isn’t she famous or something?” One of them was actually well-informed. He was still guilty by association with the other three, however.

As for the other young man, he kept a careful eye on Fran. His Sword Mastery level was the highest among the three, so he could probably sense how strong Fran was. What’s more, the two young men weren’t under the Resentful status effect like the other three.

“A little beastgirl like her couldn’t be that strong!”

“Beastmen are pretty strong in general, so I don’t know what gives you that idea. Besides, I hear the king awarded her with honors for excellent service in the capital. There’s no way that she’s weak.”

“Th-that’s...”

“She’s still a little girl!”

“He’s right! We just have to pounce her all at once!”

What are these clowns doing? They’re huddling up before a fight.

But I noticed something strange about them as I watched them discuss their options. There was foreign mana in their bodies. It was so faint that I had to observe them closely to notice it. What could it be?

Fran, try hitting them with a strong mana force.

Mana force?

Yeah. But don’t kill them, all right?

“Okay.”

“Ah! I see you’ve come to your—Hooorgh!”

“How da—Aaargh!”

“You li—Eeeergh!”

“W-wai—Aiiie!”

“H-hel—Yaaaargh!”

Personally, I thought Mana Thruster would’ve done the trick, but Fran proceeded to inject mana right into them. She struck the three idiots in the gut, hard enough that they coughed blood and were sent hurtling into the wall. Meanwhile, she slapped the two younger men into the sky. I could tell that she held back on the younger men, though they’d still have broken bones from the landing—they were beginners, after all.

But Fran was satisfied—our experiment had worked. The foreign mana disappeared from the nobles and they were no longer Resentful. Although these people were bound to be angry at Fran for what she did in the capital, the status effect had brought all that rage to the surface. Someone else was manipulating their anger. That was why the foreign mana disappeared when Fran hit them with her mana charged hands.

Fran raised her head after she was done healing them and went deeper into the alley.

What is it, Fran?

There’s something here.

Really? I don’t feel anything...

Bark, bark!

You too, Jet?

I was the only one who couldn’t feel whatever Fran and Jet had found. Their wild instincts were more honed than mine for sure, but it was odd that I couldn’t sense what they were sensing at all.

What sense do you guys have that I don’t...is it a smell? Whatever was hiding itself from us couldn’t quite conceal its own scent. *Where is it, Fran?*

That alley there.

We walked down the alley and made a right where the creature was hiding.

Can you grab it, Jet?

“Woof!”

Jet leapt into action at my command. He used Shadow Walk to disappear from Fran’s shadow. Soon enough, we heard a scream from the corner of the alley.

“Aaaaargh!”

“Grrrr!”

The voice sounded hoarse and raspy, like it belonged to an old man. Jet then dragged the owner of the voice before us.

“Urrrgh.... How did you know where I was...?”

He seemed like an old man. Tattered robes covered his small body, his hands and feet which peeked out of them were as dry as a mummy’s.

“*You!*” the old man screamed at Fran. “You did this!”

“Woof!”

“Urgh!”

Jet held the old man beneath his paws as he tried to get up, ripping his tattered robes even further. His robe was apparently enchanted, though, because right then the so-called old man’s true aura then revealed itself.

This guy’s an undead!

“Hm!”

The old man’s desiccated limbs made sense now. His face was exactly like a mummy. His eye sockets were hollowed out. His skin, dehydrated and leathery. Lips peeled back into his face, revealing yellow teeth. He was an animated corpse.

Undead were known to have weak aura to begin with but he had Stealth, Conceal, and Conceal Presence among other scout-type Skills. His presence-concealing robe made it all the more difficult for the ordinary person to detect him. He couldn’t hide his scent, however. Faint as it was, Fran and Jet’s heightened olfactory senses could still pick it up.

The mummy also possessed another suspicious Skill called Mental Agitation:

Anger. Apparently, it could incite another person into a fit of rage. He must have used this to enrage the nobles from earlier. It wasn't strong enough to make them lose their minds, but that made it all the more useful for inciting unrest in a city.

If you were to send someone flying into a fit of rage, they would stand out so much that the authorities would soon subdue them. But *slightly* shortening people's tempers would worsen their decision-making. Apply it to the majority of the people in power, and chaos would soon descend. Infighting would transform into murder quite quickly.

The mummy was working for either Aschtner or Raydoss, and my money was on Raydoss.

Can Raydoss make talking undead now?

Jean's undead and the lich were the only ones that talked.

Yeah.

Only high-level undead had the ability to talk. Even then, most of them had lost too much of their minds to do so. Very few undead could actually carry a conversation. This mummy might not have been much of a fighter, but it was definitely advanced.

"Are you one of Raydoss' undead?"

"H-how do you know that!"

I guess he's still stupid, even if he can talk.

The mummy was smart enough to talk, but not smart enough to think.

"What are you doing here?"

"Urgh...who *are* you! Those nobles were supposed to cause a riot in the city!"

Useful information. He'd manipulated the nobles' minds, but they'd gone after Fran as soon as they saw her.

"We are—gaaargh!"

"Huh?"

"Aaaaargh!" The undead was suddenly in great pain. Powerful mana was

exploding inside him. A few moments later, he had reverted back to an ordinary corpse. That must have been a self-destruct mechanism installed by whoever was controlling him.

As we looked down on the remains of the undead, we heard screams coming from the alley behind us.

“Eeeeeek! Wh-what is that withered corpse?! Ow! It hurts so bad!”

“Hm?”

Guess they're awake.

One of the nobles was sitting up and watching us. He was supposed to be unconscious, but Fran had healed him enough so that he wouldn't die.

“How dare you...? You won't get away with this...! Aaarg!”

“Huh...? What happened...? You! Eeeegh! It hurts!”

The other nobles were awakened by the screaming. Apparently, they remembered the beating Fran gave them. Although their minds had been manipulated, they still retained their memories. They didn't recognize the undead either, so they probably weren't connected to each other.

“What do we do about this?”

Hmm. I guess we can hand the corpse over to the knights.

The knight captain was a good man, so he'd hear us out. Also, being connected to Count Olmes, these nobles were under their jurisdiction since they were supposed to be awaiting their sentence. But before we could make it to a guard post, some of the knights came careening into the alley. They looked mad, but their anger wasn't directed at Fran.

“They're over here!” one of them called out to his comrades.

“We take our eyes off you for one second and you're already out causing trouble.”

“This is why I hate dealing with these man-children!”

The knights had come looking for the nobles after they'd escaped house arrest. Someone must have reported the ruckus they heard in the alley.

“Whoa! D-did you do this?”

“What’s with the body?”

Crap. I forgot to store the body away while worrying about the undead.

The knights readied themselves as soon as they saw the corpse. They suspected Fran had something to do with it, but they also knew how strong she was.

Fortunately, the squad leader recognized Fran from her time in Alessa and told his men to be at ease. He heard her explanation of the situation and took the nobles and the corpse into custody.

The knights even thanked Fran despite beating up five aristocrats. It really drove home how much public sentiment had turned against Marquis Aschtner, Count Olmes, and anyone related to their schemes.

We then returned to the guild to report the potential undead threat. Klimt sighed and leaned his head against his hand. Fran had somehow managed to create more work for him.

“I appreciate your report but...urghhh.”

“You okay?”

“I’ll manage,” Klimt muttered, massaging his forehead. He could already imagine the amount of paperwork that he would have to deal with. *Don’t worry, Klimt. We’ll leave Alessa soon enough.*

Fran, let’s get out of here before Klimt gets an ulcer.

Hm. Fran started walking away as Klimt issued orders to his subordinates, but the Guildmaster stopped her midway.

“H-hold on!”

“Hm?”

“I would like to issue a quest for you.”

“A quest?”

“Yes.”

The potential for more undead lurking in Alessa was cause for concern. Klimt wanted Fran and Jet to patrol Alessa in case they could find more. “I just need you here for a day.”

“Can’t you or Amanda do it?”

“My sorcery isn’t suited for fine work and Amanda is out hunting on the outskirts. Besides, I doubt the enemy would try anything with Amanda around.”

Basically, Klimt was too powerful and Amanda too famous for detective work. Amanda wasn’t around, anyway.

“You’re the best one for the job,” he said.

“Hmm.” Fran frowned, thinking it over. She wanted to leave for the Demon Wolf’s Garden as soon as possible. I was happy that she was worried about me, but I was also worried about Alessa. If it fell to Raydoss, the rest of Granzell would be in danger.

Not that I loved Granzell or anything, but the enemy of our enemy was our ally here. Raydoss was *definitely* our enemy, and it’d be best to support Granzell for all of its pro-adventurer policies.

Also, Fran would be depressed if anything were to happen to Alessa when she wasn’t around. A single day was a small price to pay.

Let’s take the quest, Fran.

But what about you?

We’ll only be here for a day. We still have time.

Fran paused for a moment. “Well...all right.”

“Thank you.” Klimt looked relieved and bowed his head. He would’ve needed to look for a replacement if Fran had refused.

“So I can go to the noble district now?”

“You’re going to have to. As Guildmaster of the Adventurers’ Guild in Alessa, I hereby grant you the authority to carry out the undead investigation by any means necessary. The viscount has charged me with protecting the city from Raydoss, so your authority will extend to nobles.”

“I can boss them around?”

“Not quite. While you can’t give them express orders, the guild will deal with anyone who refuses to cooperate with you. You might even call it...intimidation tactics. Lesser nobles are the only ones left in Alessa. But please, try not to cause any trouble for the viscount. He might not be very reliable, but he is still royalty.”

Klimt didn’t mince his words. Still, we didn’t hold any grudges towards the viscount; we’d never even met the guy. I’d hold Fran back if things got out of hand.

“Hm. All right. I’ll go in on those nobles.”

“We’ll...be counting on you.” Anxiety flashed over Klimt’s face for a moment. He was wondering whether Fran could be trusted to handle things. Well, it was too late now. There was no room to let talented adventurers idle about with Raydossian agents in town. In the end, he gave up and decided to let Fran do her thing. And with that, we headed for the noble district.

I don’t really know how to spot Raydossian spies. Let’s just look for traces of undead activity.

Hm.

We’ll be counting on that sniffer of yours, Jet.

“Woof!”

We had our work cut out for us. We were looking for spies who had been quietly operating in Alessa for a while. Our only lead so far was that they utilized undead to do their dirty work.

We went the long way around, through the back alleys, to reach the noble district. No signs of undead so far. We let our guard down to attract an ambush, but none came. One hour later, we were finally at our destination.

What do you think, Jet?

“Arf...”

“I don’t feel anything.”

Me neither.

Despite our best efforts to spot any suspicious activity, nothing was out of the ordinary. I didn't sense any weird mana fluctuations, Fran's ears didn't pick up anything, and Jet's nose didn't smell anything.

We picked a random direction and started walking until Jet stopped in front of a large mansion located near the heart of the noble district.

"Smell something, Jet?"

"Woof!"

Undead, perhaps?

"Arf!"

There was the faint scent of undead in the air; so faint that Jet couldn't be sure of its presence.

Wonder whose mansion this is.

"No one's inside."

Looks like it hasn't been lived in for a while. Look at all that grass.

The garden had been untended for at least a few days. However, the gates looked in relatively good condition. The mansion must have belonged to someone involved in the rebellion.

We were trying to figure out how to get in the mansion—or whether we should even go in at all—when a guard approached us from the other side of the road. A little girl peeking around a noble's mansion must have looked suspicious.

"You there! Little girl! What are you doing!"

"Hm? I'm looking for bad guys."

"Woof!"

"What? This isn't the place to be playing adventurer."

He shooed Fran away with a tired look on his face.

"I'm not pretending."

“You a newbie? This isn’t the place to get ahead of the adventurer curve. If you want proper quests, rank up so you can do them. Tamers are always in demand.”

The guard seemed to suspect Fran of being a fresh adventurer, so she showed him her guild card.

“This is...” he began, looking it over. “Oh! I apologize for my rudeness!”

No further questions from our guardsman. He was enough in the loop now to realize that the little girl standing before him was the famous Black Lightning Princess.

“You said you were looking for bad guys?” he stammered. “Are you in the middle of a quest?”

“Hm. I’m looking for undead.”

“Oh, the one from earlier!”

The guard had also been informed about the undead threat. The knights sure worked fast.

“The mansion. Whose is it?”

“This is the property of Count Olmes, ma’am!”

Wow, seriously? It was the most suspicious location by far!

The guard went on and explained that August Allsand and his servants used to live here. The mansion was left derelict after they were stripped of their rank.

“Is there a reason why you’re here?”

“I felt a strange aura.”

“By the gods!”

“Can I go in?”

“I-if I escort you...I suppose it should be fine!”

“Great. Lead the way.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Fran wasn’t his superior, but the young guard was acting like her subordinate.

Maybe this was how B Ranks were usually treated in the city. Well, Fran *was* investigating the undead mystery. That was reason enough to help her.

“I’ll get the keys!”

“Okay.” Fran nodded, watching the guard as he ran to the guard post.

Is the undead presence still around?

“Woof.”

I was worried that it would’ve run away after all the noise we’d made but the undead was still in hiding, confident in its powers of stealth.

The guard returned five minutes later.

“I have returned!” He was terribly excited. Then again, he did just stumble upon an important mission while he was making his rounds.

“I’ll go ahead. You stay close.”

“R-right!” The young guardsman opened the gates and we entered Olmes’ estate. He surveyed his surroundings nervously, tightly gripping his spear. He wasn’t going to be much use in a fight, but we’d be breaking and entering without him around.

“Jet?”

“Bark!” Jet sniffed the air and made his way to the garden. Faint as it was, he had picked up something.

“Is something here?” the guardsman asked.

“I don’t know. Jet can smell something, though.”

“Wow! Amazing!”

Three minutes later, Jet had circled all the way around the mansion. He finally stopped in the backyard.

“Arf, arf!”

“Here?”

“Woof!” He was scratching at the back door of the mansion. It looked like the service door the servants used to enter the building. There was a stone path

leading to it from the rear gates.

“Can you open this?”

“Of course!”

The guardsman had brought more keys along with him. He unlocked the door and carefully opened it for us. Fran and Jet winced, the musty smell of dust stinging their noses. The place hadn't been cleaned in ages.

Jet led the way again once we were inside the mansion. We exited the simple room we were in to find a large, carpeted hallway. Jet immediately made a right turn down one of the shabbier-looking hallways. This seemed to be the storage wing. Jet seemed to know where he was going, using his nose to navigate the dark corridors.

He entered one of the rooms and stopped in the center of it. “Woof.”

“It's in this room?”

“Woof!”

We were in a semi-basement storage room, probably used as a wine cellar. Jet tilted his head towards a corner of the room and sniffed the air. He could smell something behind its walls.

Maybe it's a hidden passage.

“Hmm...” Fran knocked on the wall and used Echolocation, revealing the chamber behind it and the stairway which led further down. “How do I open this?”

“I-I don't know. I didn't even know about this passage...”

A secret escape route. Or maybe just a hidden room.

“I'll open a path for us,” she said.

“Huh? W-wait! Are you going to destroy the wall?”

“Hm. We *do* have to find the undead.”

The guardsman started panicking when he saw the look on Fran's face. Helping the undead investigation was important, but he didn't want to take responsibility for property damage.

“But it’s for the good of Alessa...” he muttered. “But *then* the captain will find out that I took the keys to the state...but if it all ends well, then...”

He took the keys without telling anyone?! *And* he was going to ride on Fran’s success to get a promotion?! No wonder he thought Fran was trying to get ahead of the curve. He was projecting!

Knock it down, Fran.

“Hm. Blowing through it.”

“Aaaaah!”

Worry not, guardsman. This is for the good of Alessa! So kindly take the heat for us later.

Fran kicked the wall down in front of the crying guard. Square lines emerged on the walls together with the loud thump. Her kick knocked the hidden door slightly ajar. She gave it a slight push and the wall fell backward, revealing the staircase within. The wall slid down the stairs until it fell on the floor with a cracking thud. We’d definitely announced our presence, but we were pretty much bound to alert them as soon as we decided to kick the door down.

There might be enemies around. Be careful.

“Hm.”

Fran and Jet walked down the stairs, which was wide enough to accommodate them side-by-side. These stairs might’ve been bigger than the ones we saw in the mansion. Perhaps they’d been used to transport goods. Thirty steps later, Fran and Jet dropped into a ready stance.

“Huh? What?”

“Ssh! Something’s in here.”

“Grrr!”

The guard didn’t know what was going on and was visibly perturbed. I could sense the enemy’s presence now. Their energy jumped at us as soon as Fran climbed down the stairs.

Undead mana.

I can smell it.

I didn't know whether they were summoned or on standby, but Fran and the others' presence had definitely triggered them.

"Get behind me!"

"R-right."

The guard complied and Fran lit up the room with a light spell. It revealed a thirty-square-meter room...and the enemies lying within.

"Waaaaaargh!"

"Eeeek!"

"Shut up! You're too loud!"

"S-sorry!"

The newbie guardsman could be excused for screaming. We were up against half-rotted bodies, their insides on clear display. What's more, the zombie in the center of the horde was emitting a strange energy.

"Is that really a zombie...?"

"Arf?"

Weird as it looks, that's still definitely a zombie.

There were faces on the right shoulder and left side of the zombie, as if the heads of other zombies had been attached to it. It was strong, too; at least a notch higher than the rest of the zombies behind it. Whoever made it knew what they were doing. A skilled necromancer could make their thrall even stronger than it was during its life. It was why Jean's skeletons were much stronger than your average skeleton.

But unlike the undead we spotted in town, there wasn't a trace of reason left in this zombie. Its eyes were looking in opposite directions, and howling was its only form of communication.

What now?

Kill it, I guess. Not like we can talk to it.

Fran looked at the zombie's faces. First at the head, then the shoulder, then the side, then back to the head.

What's wrong?

I feel like I've seen them before.

You mean the faces?

Now that she mentioned it, I sort of recognized them, too. The zombie's main body was that of a Red Dog adventurer. Did we meet one at the guild?

I remember...these guys got kicked out after picking a fight with you!

Really?

Yes, really! You don't remember?

Hm...nope!

O-oh. Remember when we first came to the guild? There were these adventurers who complained because the guild bought their materials for cheap?

I think the Red Dog's name was Dham'n, not that Identify had revealed his old name to me. He was a former mercenary laden with debt, who'd been handed over to the authorities after Fran and I beat him up. The other two faces must be his friends.

Fran didn't remember, even after I explained. She only tilted her head in confusion.

I don't know how they ended up here, but they're zombies now. We'll beat them and report back to Klimt.

Okay.

And don't blow them up to bits. We need them in one piece for evidence.

Hm! Fran slashed at the zombie's legs to halt its movement, but the only thing she cut was air.

"Hrm."

"Wooorgh!"

The zombie was much faster than we thought. It managed to hop back to evade Fran's attack.

We're not used to zombies this fast!

The undead's movements were fluid without the clunky motions usually associated with zombies.

"Waaaargh!"

"Magic?"

It's the faces! Each of them is casting a spell!

"I see. Interesting."

The zombie had cast two spells at the same time. The shoulder face wielded fire, while the side face had water magic. Identify reported that each face had its own stats. The creature wasn't a three-faced zombie, but a zombie with two additional faces attached to it. Its stats had changed, too.

Fran, this thing's getting stronger!

"Hm. I can feel the mana."

There was a cracking sound from the zombie's stomach, followed by a surge of mana. It looked a lot like Jean's undead enhancing spells. The enhancement was no joke, either. The zombie was strong to begin with, but it'd still been just a strong zombie. Now, though, its presence was more menacing than a high ogre. Its name had changed to Powerful Zombie, and its stats were five times what they were before. Apparently, the enhancement also made it *evolve*. Evolving a thrall with magic was no mean feat. It wasn't something you could do remotely.

Was its necromancer nearby? I scanned the area but couldn't find any mage activities. The evolution might be part of a premade spell.

"Oooooorgh!"

"Raaaagh!"

"Guoooooh!"

"Hrm!"

Its spells are getting faster!

Fran dodged the two spells the zombie cast. Its stats weren't the only thing enhanced about the zombie...the thing had more Skills now, too. The main body had Advanced Sword Mastery, and each of the faces gained Speedcast.

Fran took the zombie seriously now. There'd be no holding back. Her sharp eyes observed the three-faced zombie, and it started attacking when it noticed the change.

"Uooooorh!"

It swiped at Fran while unleashing spells from both sides. Not a bad tactic. An ordinary adventurer would be hit by it...but Fran was no ordinary adventurer.

"Tsch!"

"Warg?"

"Haaa!" Fran dodged the spells and blocked the zombie's sword thrust. The three-faced creature was stunned. Not only was this little girl managing to avoid its attacks—she was also striking back! It hadn't expected a creature that looked so weak to be so strong. Though it lacked rational thought, the zombie retained its animalistic instincts.

"Waaaaorh!"

The three-faced zombie howled, commanding the rest of the zombies to charge. The horde was swarming Fran to lock her down. It was a decent tactic, but the zombies had no chance of walling her in.

"Too slow!" She jumped over the horde and cut them down at once. In less than ten seconds, they were wiped out. The three-faced zombie stopped and took on a defensive posture, but this was the last mistake it would ever make.

"Tsch!" Fran brandished me and jumped at it as fast as she could. She lopped off its right arm, then its left. She took off the zombie's right leg with her third strike.

"Waaaargh!"

The three-faced zombie retaliated wildly with its remaining limbs, but to no avail. It was helpless under Fran's storm of slashes. She was methodically slicing

and dicing it, leaving enough recognizable bits behind to serve as evidence. By the time the creature was chopped up into twenty parts, the hostile presence had vanished from the room. There weren't any hidden enemies around, so the battle had been won.

"There's something sticking out of its stomach."

A glass shard?

A transparent glass shard was sticking out of the three-faced zombie's gut. It was already broken, so it was hard to figure out what it was, but I guessed that it was once a flask. Not something you'd ordinarily find inside a zombie.

When the zombie evolved, there was a great surge of mana from its stomach...maybe from this flask? Perhaps its evolution was due to a specialized chemical compound instead of necromancy.

We're running on guesses at this point.

Hm.

There was nothing for me to identify. The compound inside the flask had long been absorbed by the zombie, leaving us with little evidence. We could only store the zombie away to hand over to the guild.

No crystal, either. I guess it's one of those undead that was made by a necromancer.

Hm.

Was it posted here to guard the place?

"Is it over?"

"Hm. It's safe now. I'm checking the place out."

"Woof!"

"I-I'll help too!"

We washed the floors of zombie fluids with some water spells before investigating the room. There were several tattered beds in here, probably where the zombies were sleeping before. 'Bed' was a generous term, actually. They were little more than bare strips of wood with human-shaped stains on

them.

The zombies were probably set to activate at the first sign of intruders. We couldn't detect them earlier because they were nothing but corpses before we came in.

We looked around the room but couldn't find anything of interest. I felt convinced they were guarding some big secret...but maybe the undead themselves were that secret?

Eventually, we made it back outside the mansion with the green guardsman in tow. The sights and smells of the chamber had not been kind to him.

"I'm going to the guild to report this."

"Do you mind if I report to the captain about this?"

"Go ahead."

"Th-thank you very much!"

The guard jumped with joy. The mission would've been pointless if he couldn't make a report about it.

"I'm one step closer to a promotion...!"

At which point Fran laid a zombie at the guard's feet.

"Urk! Huh?" He pinched his nose and looked confused. The fresh air had cleansed his nostrils of the stink, so the return of the zombie's odor was a critical hit.

"Evidence. You'll need it."

"I-I guess I do need evidence...but what should I do with it?"

Fran looked quizzically at him. "Just take it with you."

"W-well, yes but..."

"I'll be going now. Bye-bye."

"Ah, wai—"

Fran and Jet took off without waiting for the guardsman to finish. I could hear his wailing as we rushed away, but we were in a hurry. *I hope you get your*

promotion, guardsman, and good luck lugging that zombie to your guard post.

We returned to the guild and headed to Klimt's office. The Guildmaster could already tell that something was wrong.

"There's been a development?"

"Hm."

"I see." Klimt nodded sternly. He had to be screaming internally at all the work that would be added to his plate. "So Count Olmes *did* have something to do with it. I didn't think he would have a secret basement...quite ingenious."

He glanced at Jet. The room would've been difficult to find without a sharp sense of smell. He'd made the right choice by assigning the quest to Fran.

"May I see the zombies you defeated there?" he asked.

"Here?"

"Absolutely not." Klimt took us to the carving room where Fran could lay out the zombies. He didn't flinch when the zombies were *glorp*—ed onto the floor, but observed them thoughtfully.

"Hmm..."

"Recognize them?"

"Yes. This man used to be an adventurer."

"I knew it."

A Guildmaster couldn't possibly know the names of all the adventurers under his jurisdiction, but he could at least recognize their faces. He didn't seem particularly worked up about it, though.

"They were expelled from the guild after causing trouble. Do you know anything about them, Nell?"

"Y-yes." Nell gagged when she saw the zombies, but the veteran receptionist made no attempt to leave the carving room. "We handed them over to the guards after reports of them shaking down clients for money."

"Ah, *those* people," Klimt said. He shed no tears for the zombified delinquent adventurers. Dham'n and his crew weren't the only ones who were handed

over to the guards. Apparently, the rest of the zombies were also adventurers turned criminals.

“The previous guard captain worked for Count Olmes,” he continued, “so that’s probably how he got ahold of the corpses.” He paused. “No, maybe they killed them to perform necromancy on them.”

Criminal adventurers made for stronger undead than regular civilians. Besides, no one would look for them if they disappeared.

“You said these zombies were stronger than regular zombies.”

“Hm. This one was several times stronger. It evolved, too.”

“Evolved?”

“Hm...don’t know how, though.”

Fran told Klimt about the flask she found in the zombie’s belly. He agreed it was probably the key to the zombie’s evolution. Either way, he couldn’t deny that the creature had evolved, whether through a spell or a chemical change.

“There is a high likelihood of a powerful necromancer conducting experiments in Alessa...”

Necromancers with the ability to remote control undead were particularly dangerous. By hiding away corpses and reanimating them on command, they could terrorize entire populations.

“Fran,” he continued, “I’m afraid I have to ask you to continue your investigation of the city.”

“Okay.”

Klimt sighed. “And just when I thought things were finally settling down. Count Olmes keeps making trouble even when he’s no longer around. I swear, that man—”

“I’ll be going now.” Fran’s eyes were beginning to glaze over, so she decided to leave before Klimt’s complaints put her to sleep.

What was up with Nell just now?

O-oh, that? I think she’s just tired. Nothing to worry about.

Nell had desperately looked at Fran as if begging her to take her along. She didn't want to be left alone with a complaining Klimt. But there was a necromancer at large in Alessa. *Sorry, Nell—you'll have to hold down the fort!*

Teacher?

Never mind. Let's get back to our investigation. We need to find that necromancer.

"Hm."

"Woof!"

If the undead in the basement had been a trap, there was a good chance that the necromancer had long since left Alessa. However, we had reason to believe that they were still in town.

We kept searching, but—try as we might—we couldn't find anything out of the ordinary. We spent the rest of the day walking around Alessa and its major streets, but no dice. At most, we spotted some tasty-looking food stalls in the alleys, so I guess it wasn't all that bad. Fran and Jet had fun, too.

Still, no sign of the Raydossian spy in Alessa, and not a single lead.

Where to next, Fran?

"Hrm...we'll check out the restaurant we couldn't go to earlier!"

"Arf, arf!"

That's not what I—But you know what? You're right. We should get some food and discuss our next course of action.

"Hm!"

I couldn't say no to her when she pulled out the puppy dog eyes. Fran had had plenty of sandwiches and skewers as we walked around town, but the energy she got from them was probably spent by now.

Night had fallen on Alessa as we made our way to a back-alley restaurant, one that was too crowded for us in the evening. It was a fancy place located near the noble district. The customers had settled down now and they were all nicely dressed, enjoying dinner. I didn't think they were nobles—probably just well-to-

do commoners.

The waitress looked confused as she came out to greet Fran.

“I’m sorry, it’s dinner time now and we have a different menu from our lunch menu,” she said meekly. The lunch menu was cheaper and was served from the afternoon to the evening. The dinner menu was a bit more expensive in comparison. She thought that Fran had entered the restaurant by mistake.

“No problem,” said Fran.

“A-all right.” The waitress let us in, probably thinking that it was okay since Fran said there wouldn’t be a problem...or maybe she just thought that she could have Fran do the dishes if she didn’t have the money to pay for it.

Still worried, the waitress started taking Fran’s order...but that worry turned to contempt as she realized that she was ordering five people’s worth of food. She must’ve thought that Fran was going to dine and dash.

Fran, show her some money. Just a few coins will do.

“Hm? Money?”

“Oh! I-I’m so sorry!” the waitress stammered—she must’ve thought Fran knew why she was staring at her now, and she quickly retreated.

Fran just blinked. “Hm.”

We were seated outside on the terrace so Jet could eat with us. Fran put her hands together when her first course, soup, arrived.

“Let’s eat.”

“Woof!”

They feasted on the food as it came. I could tell that the people inside were getting annoyed. Fran’s order had backed up the whole kitchen, it seemed. Onlookers gasped at all the food this little girl was having.

In any case, it took less than thirty minutes for her to demolish her whole meal. Both staff and diner applauded Fran’s feat of feasting. It was then that I noticed Jet was acting funny.

What is it, boy?

“Arf.”

He motioned his muzzle towards the restaurant.

Suspicious activity?

“Woof.”

Jet felt that something was off, but he wasn’t quite sure. Either way, something had caught his attention.

Inside the restaurant?

“Arf.”

The smells of the restaurant were interfering with his nose. I just hoped he wasn’t smelling something tasty.

Let’s check it out. Fran, you just stay here and rest.

“Woof!”

Okay.

Fran ordered drinks and Jet slunk away into the shade. He moved from shadow to shadow, escaping the notice of everyone in the restaurant. Meanwhile, I’d transformed my decorative strip into a fine string and followed him where he went. A sentient piece of string might have stuck out in the bright restaurant, so I went around the outside and snuck in through the kitchen window.

Where is it, Jet?

“Woof!”

Over there?

Jet wasn’t in the kitchen. He was further inside, within the shadows of a toolshed in the backyard.

What’s in there?

“Woof.”

Jet lightly scratched at the pavement next to the shed. I couldn’t see anything, so I decided to use some Skills to investigate further. Heat Sense came up dry.

So did Mana Sense and Presence Sense. It wasn't until I used Echolocation that I detected the anomaly.

Hey, there's a space under here.

"Woof!"

I looked for a gap under the cobblestone path but couldn't find any. Eventually, I just gave up and made a hole with an earth spell. At fifty centimeters deep, I hit a dried-up bit of plank covering a larger hole. I went in further to investigate.

I can't see the bottom.

There was a deep vertical hole beneath the ground, with an opening large enough to drop a rope ladder down. There was a larger space at the bottom of the hole. I thought it was the sewers at first, but that didn't seem right. It was an underground tunnel which led...somewhere, and the ceilings were high enough that Fran wouldn't need to crouch to walk through it. My guess was that it led to the noble district.

Jet joined me through the shadows once I had a visual on the tunnel.

There you are. What do you think?

"Woof."

Jet sniffed the air and nodded. This was definitely the source of the strange scent he smelled earlier. It was difficult to detect since it had mingled with all the smells of the kitchen. Jet was the only one who could've picked it up.

Good job.

"Woof."

Jet's breath sent dust dancing around us, dust that had settled on the floor for quite some time...this path hadn't been used in a while. I wondered where it would lead, but I couldn't leave Fran behind. I used Beacon, a Timespace spell, to leave a teleport marker in the underground tunnel. The spell allowed me to teleport to locations outside of line of sight.

We're back.

Find anything?

Yeah! We're going to need to teleport to it though, so we'll need to find a quiet place to do that.

Got it.

Fran settled the bill and quietly moved behind the restaurant. It was a crowded residential area, though, and the tunnel was located beneath some houses. There were still a lot of people around, too. That's what being the restaurant district of the city gets you, I suppose.

We kept walking until we found a quiet place and teleported away.

Here we are.

"Woof!"

We were back to where I had placed the beacon from earlier.

"Where are we?"

We're under the restaurant from earlier. Jet smelled some undead from here.

"Woof."

"Wow. Think we'll find them at the end of this thing?"

Only one way to find out.

"Hm!" Fran unsheathed me and carefully trod down the passageway. She left footsteps in the dust like it was freshly fallen snow. This path hadn't been used in ages. We carried on for three minutes until we found a T-shaped corridor. Now, Fran and I could finally feel the anomaly.

It's like something's been crawling on the ground.

"It's faint, but there's a weird smell, too."

No dust here, either.

Either this path was frequently traveled or it had been used recently. There were black smears on the floor along with what appeared to be...blood? Maybe the zombies used this passageway to get around. Were there other underground passages like this in Alessa?

Where to now?

“Here.”

Oh? Why do you say that?

“Instinct.”

R-right.

“Hm. We can just come back if it doesn’t go anywhere.”

Fran had a point. *Pick a path, any path.* It was better than going back the way we came.

We turned left, following the black smears down the hallway. We kept our wits about us, but there didn’t seem to be any enemies nearby. At the end of the path was a vertical climb like the one we came down from.

I’ll see where this thing leads.

I extended another one of my strips again to check the place out. Unlike the restaurant entrance, this one wasn’t covered by cobblestone. I only needed to contend with a wooden door. The restaurant staff themselves were probably oblivious to the modifications made in their backyard.

It’s pitch-black up here.

The hatch led to a stairway, and the stairway led to a large and deserted room. There wasn’t much dust here either, which meant it’d probably been used recently. This seemed like someone’s basement.

“I don’t feel anything.”

“Woof.”

There was a large wooden box in the center of the room, about two meters long. Actually, the box was shaped more like a coffin than anything else, and I could feel mana coming out of it. Probably manatech.

What is this thing? It looks like a necromantic tool...

Identify reported that the coffin was a Coffin of Rest. It allowed undead to slumber in them while concealing their presence. Such a manatech coffin was utilized by necromancers to transport their undead servants. The coffin shape

made it obvious as to what was inside, sure, but the shape itself was probably essential to its function.

“Woof, woof!”

“You smell something familiar?”

“Arf.”

The coffin smelled like the mummy we’d defeated the other day. This must have been his base of operations. The undead need a constant supply of mana to function. The coffin acted like an external power supply, extending the undead’s unlife expectancy.

I don’t think the necromancer’s here anymore.

“How come?”

The mummy wouldn’t need to rely on this coffin if they were.

“I see.”

Let’s go upstairs.

“Woof!”

We took the coffin with us and concealed ourselves before heading up. As expected, we were in someone’s mansion. Much like Count Olmes’ mansion, it hadn’t been cleaned in a while. The owner was probably one of Olmes’ cronies, which meant he’d probably been arrested already.

We continued our investigation of the mansion but came up dry. No hidden hallways, no clues left behind, no leads.

We returned underground to the T-shaped corridor and went the other way this time. Eventually, we found another vertical climb—the T-shaped corridor seemingly had three points of access.

There’s some light coming through.

“I smell grass.”

This specific hatch led to a particularly strange location. After exiting through the wooden door, we were now surrounded by four high walls. An ordinary person would have trouble climbing out of this. There were bricks jutting out of

the walls, which I figured was done on purpose for the sake of footing.

I extended my strip again and found that the location was surrounded by noble mansions. Walled-in by four of them, in fact. There were no gaps in the walls, but one of the corners of the mansion had a recess in it which led to our access point.

The wooden door had signs of recent repair, which meant someone had been using it lately. Maybe our mummy had been a carpenter in his past life.

Smell anything, Jet?

“Woof!”

Great. Lead the way.

“You can do it, boy.”

“Woof, woof!”

We followed Jet’s nose, passing through noble mansions, until we eventually found ourselves in a familiar location.

“This is the alleyway we were in.” The same alleyway we’d defeated the mummy, in fact.

Is this where the scent trail stops?

“Woof.”

We had somehow retraced the mummy’s steps from when he left his coffin. He must’ve been asleep for a long time if there were no other traces of his scent around. The necromancer had probably fled Alessa after leaving their minions behind to wreak havoc.

It’s getting late. We can file our report tomorrow. Let’s look for a place to stay.

“I don’t mind staying at the guild lodgings.”

Uhhh, let’s stay at an inn. We have money now, after all.

A B Rank sleeping in the guild pub would make for bad optics. Klimt would mind, even if we didn’t. We’d definitely be better off looking for an inn, unless we wanted to pop his stomach ulcers wide open.

Fran clapped her fist into her open hand upon the suggestion. She had an idea.

“I know. We’ll go there.”

There?

“Hm!”

She nodded, and we headed for an inn located near the Adventurers’ Guild. It was an average-looking inn with affordable prices. Top of the low range, bottom of the middle range.

“Welcome,” the receptionist said and then paused. “Will you be staying the night?”

“Hm. Got any vacancies?”

“Yes, but are you alone?” she asked. Little girls didn’t often travel alone, after all.

“Here,” Fran said, showing the receptionist her guild card.

“Huh? An adventurer? And it’s real? Well...all right.” The receptionist accepted Fran’s guild card, just as she had the last time we were here.

Yes, this was the inn we first stayed at in Alessa. It was a trustworthy inn providing accommodations for female adventurers. The rooms were on the small side, but they were clean and tidy. For Fran, this place was filled with memories.

“Hm. This is the room.”

This takes me back. Nothing had changed in the room. The bed, drawers, desk, wardrobe...everything was where we had left it.

Fran could afford to stay at better hotels now. In fact, we had done just that some time ago. Still, she was happy here. She dived into the bed and started rolling on it after I cleaned her up with a cleansing spell. She buried her face in the pillow and took a huge whiff of it.

Well, someone’s excited.

“It’s this scent.”

She smiled while sniffing the pillow. I still didn't get it.

D-does it smell that good?

"It smells just like the first time we stayed here together."

Fran had been moved by the simple fact of an inn back then. It was her first night after being freed from slavery. There were better and nicer inns, but none could make Fran as happy as this one.

"And now Jet's with us."

"Woof!"

Jet jumped into bed and right into Fran's arms. The sight of a little girl playing with her beloved pet dog was the very picture of bliss.

"Teacher."

Yeah?

"Thanks."

Really, what's gotten into you?

"I just wanted to let you know."

I see.

"Hm..."

Fran nodded, smiled, and before long had floated off to sleep.

She's so much stronger than before, but she still sleeps like a baby.

Fran looked her age when she was innocently asleep like this. Jet had fallen asleep too, baring his belly for all to see. I wondered if our direwolf was really a wolf.

"Teacher..."

I know. I'm right here.

"Hm..."

Sweet dreams, Fran.

Chapter 2:

The Lingering Scent of Raydoss

“SO THERE IS a high likelihood of the necromancer no longer being in Alessa,” Klimt concluded.

“Hm. No one was there today, either.”

“I see. Well, I have no reason to call your investigation into doubt. Thank you, Fran.”

It was the day after we stayed at the inn. We were reporting our findings to the guild after double-checking the underground passage. We told Klimt everything, from the passage and to the coffin we found inside it. Knowing how thorough Fran was, Klimt checked the quest off as accomplished. He even threw in something extra for our trouble.

“Will you be heading to the Demon Wolf’s Garden now?” he asked.

“Hm.”

“Keep your guard up. You know how dangerous it is there.”

“Of course it’s dangerous. I can’t train if it isn’t.”

“Naturally,” Klimt said. “I’m not sure whether to be impressed or exasperated.”

“Huh?”

“Be careful out there, Fran. You may be strong, but you’re not invincible.”

“Thanks.” Fran smiled, bowed her head, and left Klimt’s office.

The Guildmaster would continue investigating the underground passage. I could see the glimmer of jealousy in his eyes. He still wanted to go adventuring like Fran did. We left the guild to the sound of Klimt giving orders to his men.

Let’s get going.

“Hm.”

Next stop, the Withering Forest. We said goodbye to Delt and stepped outside of Alessa. The trip had taken a few hours on Randell's carriage the last time we were here, but these days we'd be able to get there in no time.

"Come on, Jet."

"Woof!"

Jet took to the skies. Estimated time of arrival was less than an hour.

Fran pointed at our destination as Jet cut through the winds.

"Teacher! It's that forest!"

That's the one, all right. An unforgettable forest, as ominous as it was solemn. A strange forest which could unsettle you just by looking at it...the forest where Fran and I first met. *And it hasn't changed a bit.*

I now had a bird's-eye view of the Withering Forest.

Two hours later...

Oh, put that one here.

"Hm."

We'd landed in front of the Withering Forest and had begun to cook all of the ingredients we got in Alessa; we had to replenish our food supply since the capital had drained most of it. I made a shed and kitchen out of land magic and was currently cooking with a combination of fire, water, and wind spells.

Well? Did you do it?

"Like this?"

That's it. That's a good length for it.

"Got it."

For once, Fran was helping me out. I wouldn't have minded if she had just played outside, but she was strangely motivated today. I guess she wanted to get to the Demon Wolf's Garden as fast as possible.

And that's how you make creamy shrimp pasta!

"It looks great," Fran drooled.

Careful! You'll slobber all over it!

"Whoops. That was close."

Suddenly, I felt a presence in front of the shed. The presence knocked on the door...

Who could be brave enough to come here?

Earlier, I'd felt some adventurers loitering about, but no one dared approach the strange shed in the middle of the plains. Those adventurers knew better and left us alone.

Jet was also lying on the front door. The mere presence of a familiar was enough to fend off onlookers and even bandits. When it came to being a guard dog, Jet was top dog.

So there shouldn't be anyone who could possibly come close to the door, right? But the fact that they could even knock on our door meant that they'd placated Jet somehow. Jet wasn't in battle mode; maybe it was someone we knew.

It's just one person. Strong mana. Definitely not a greenhorn adventurer. Who could it be?

"I'll have a look."

Careful out there.

Fran trotted over to the door—magic though it was, the shed still had one of those, though it was really more of a door-shaped stone. Fran was strong enough to open it, of course, or to at least push it open. I hadn't expected the door to be used at all, really. I was going to cook everything up in two hours and destroy the shed with land magic after we were done.

I'd ordered Jet to chase anything that approached us away unless it was an emergency. The only exception was if he saw adventurers or travelers getting attacked by monsters. Was the person outside in some kind of danger? Hmm... they seemed too strong to be in any *real* danger.

How'd it go?

"Hm. It's Aristeia."

Uh. Aristeia? Godsmith Aristeia?

"Hm. Aristeia."

Aristeia was a Godsmith who'd taken care of us recently. Godsmiths were blacksmiths who could create Godswords, the world's most powerful superweapons. She was currently the only Godsmith left in the world, and she had traveled the world, crafting various miraculous items as she did. She was an elusive sort, not one you could exactly schedule an appointment with.

So what was she doing here?

Well...let her in, I guess.

I'd pretty much finished cooking and was only left with the washing up, which could wait.

"It's been a while, Teacher," Aristeia said.

It really is you. I thought you were supposed to be in Belioth. What are you doing here?

"I was," she paused, "Until a fight between Godswords broke out. I couldn't let that go unchecked."

I forgot that you Godsmiths could detect where Godswords were.

She must have hurried to Granzell when she sensed the battle of the Godswords in the capital. Her sixth sense was probably how she located me here, too.

"I can sense them as long as they're in their unleashed state. They were near the capital of Granzell, last I checked."

Belioth was a country to the north of Granzell. Aristeia would have to go through Alessa in order to reach the capital.

So you're looking into the Godswords?

"Yes. Would you happen to know anything about them?"

Know them? I'd been caught in the crossfire with them! I think I was the only one who'd fought both Aschtner and Fanatix.

Like you wouldn't believe. I got caught up in the whole thing. I almost died or got destroyed or...whatever.

"Really? Can you tell me what happened?"

Telling Aristeia about all that Godsword stuff was probably the best way to go. She was in the business of making them, after all.

Sure. I'll tell you everything I know.

"Thanks."

And so I told Aristeia about Fran's great adventure; right from the moment she stepped foot in the capital up to the point she left.

Aristeia fell silent.

What is it?

"Well, I know Fran's place in the whole story, but you didn't tell me much about the Godswords."

Whoops. Sorry.

I got excited halfway through the story that I ended up talking solely about Fran. I made sure, now, to tell Aristeia what I knew about Fanatix and Urslars who showed up to fight.

"So Fanatix survived and managed to operate on its own," she mused.

It was already broken, so I don't think it could use all of its powers.

"And you said it talked? That Godsword lacked such abilities, as far as I know."

My guess is that it was an amalgamation of all the people Fanatix had absorbed.

At the end of our info-swap, Aristeia sighed. "So Fanatix is completely destroyed now."

Uhhh...sorry about that.

I knew Aristeia had strong feelings about Godswords. I wasn't sure how she

would react to the news, but she didn't seem all that sad about it.

"It's all right. Fanatix was ruining the lives of many. It was only right that it was destroyed. I won't hold it against you."

She might be a touch sad, but she knew it had to be done. Fanatix had gained a will of its own, going so far as to manipulate its user to wreak havoc upon the masses.

But something had been bothering me for a while. *When I destroyed Fanatix, I absorbed its powers using Cannibalize. Do you see any changes in me?*

It'd be bad if all the personalities the Godsword had absorbed affected me, but diagnosing a sword without the proper equipment was hard, even for Aristeia.

"Changes? I would have to analyze you properly in order to see those..."

Right. Never mind. That's going to take too much time.

"Are you in a hurry?"

You can say that.

We were in a hurry to get to the Demon Wolf's Garden, but I wasn't sure if I could tell her that. I didn't mind, of course, but considering that I didn't know just what we were dealing with...the prospect was a bit concerning. Let's say the mystery man was a god or had connections to a god—would it be all right for me to divulge this to Aristeia when, perhaps, it ought to be kept secret? Granted, I wasn't *told* to keep it under wraps, but it could still cause trouble. Gods were a strange-minded and capricious sort.

There's somewhere we have to be after this. I might learn more about myself there.

"What? Really? Now that you mention it, we're near the Demon Wolf's Garden."

Yeah.

"Ugh. I would love to come with you if not for the Godswords...but I can't just ignore the existence of the Fanatix replicas."

The Fanatix replicas were of great import to the Godsmith. I happened to have some of those replicas in storage after I'd destroyed them. Maybe I could give some to her?

You mean this?

"You have a replica on you?!" Aristeia was shocked. Her eyes were completely fixed upon the broken replica I had taken out. Unfortunately, I had to curb her expectations. This specimen was already dead.

I think it lost all of its powers after I destroyed it.

"Even so," Aristeia mused. She analyzed it and then sighed. "Well, it really is broken. But I don't know whether that's because it was destroyed itself or because the true, original Fanatix was annihilated. Still...being a copy of Fanatix, it might cause trouble again."

I'd never considered that. I thought the battle was won after we destroyed Fanatix itself...but was there a chance of the replicas gaining sentience?

"I need more information." Aristeia shook her head and put down the broken sword. She couldn't get all the details by merely inspecting it.

I see. By the way, the blacksmith involved in the production of the Fanatix replicas would like to meet you.

"Oh?"

His name is Garrus, Granzell's greatest blacksmith. Ever heard of him?

"Of course. He's the only blacksmith alive close to becoming a Godsmith."

Great, then this would be quick. *He'd love to meet you, so feel free to ask him for details. Just tell him I sent you.*

"Very well. Does he know who you are?"

Right, I should probably mention that. *Yeah. He took good care of me and Fran. He's the blacksmith who made my sheath and Fran's gear.*

"I see! I must go and apologize to him, then. I did modify his work without asking, after all."

Tell him I said hi when you do.

“All right.”

I wasn't expecting to fulfill Garrus' request of introducing him to Aristeia so quickly. I just hoped he wouldn't blow out his back at the surprise visit from the Godsmith.

“By the way, Fran, aren't you an adventurer?”

“Hm.”

“Would you happen to know any B Ranks?”

“Hm? Why do you ask?”

“I have a quest for them. Very simple, decent pay, and I can vouch for the client's integrity.”

Why do you need a B Rank if it's a simple quest?

“The quest is simple, yes, but difficult. Especially for those with troublesome personalities. I'd appreciate it if you could introduce me to some B Ranks, Fran.”

But Fran wouldn't need to introduce anyone at all. “I'm B Rank.”

“What? I thought you were C-Rank last time.”

“Hm. I got promoted in the capital.”

“Really! So how about it? Will you take on my quest?”

Fran folded her arms and thought about it.

“No?” said Aristeia.

“I'm going to the Demon Wolf's Garden to train. I don't have time to take on unnecessary quests right now.”

This wasn't a quest we could polish off in a day, like the one in Alessa. We couldn't just promise Aristeia that we'd do it only to put it off.

But Aristeia clarified the conditions of her quest. “You don't have to do it right away. The client says I have five years to bring someone to her.”

Five years? That's a long time.

“That's the kind of quest this is.”

Aristea explained the contents of the quest, and I wondered if Fran was suited for it. It sure sounded like she wasn't.

You want her to be a dueling partner for the Academy of Magic?

"Yes. You'll be up against children—most of whom are older than Fran, now that I think about it. They're not very strong, either."

That wasn't really a problem. If anything, Fran would be more than happy to take on stronger opponents. But these weren't adventurers whom she could just toss around and call it a training session. Fran wasn't exactly built for this sort of thing.

"You're allowed to be a little rough on them. If anything, you'll be giving them a taste of the harsh reality of defeat before they set out into the world. In any case, you don't have to respond immediately. Just do it in your own time."

"Okay."

We couldn't turn Aristea down after all she had done for us. We could think about the details after our training was done.

"You hungry, Aristea?" Fran asked.

"Yes," Aristea said. "But are you sure I can stay for lunch?"

"Hm. We have freshly made curry."

I'd done most of the cooking, of course! Fran would pick away at the curry throughout the whole cooking process, so I couldn't let her help.

"Aah, curry! Sounds good!"

I just remembered that Aristea was also a curry convert. We'd given her the recipe, but I doubted her golems could make it exactly like I did.

Aristea carefully took the plate of curry Fran gave her and savored its flavor. "Delicious as ever!"

"Curry is the best."

And so they enjoyed a short lunch together. Fran would've loved to chat longer with her, but Aristea also had places to be.

"Come find me if anything happens. I think I'll be in the capital for a while."

“Hm. All right.”

“And Teacher, try not to break yourself.”

Yeah, I know.

“Catch you later, Jet.”

“Woof!”

Aristea gave my blade a good polish before leaving. She was reluctant to go.

“We should get going, too,” Fran said.

You’re right.

“Woof.

We tore down the shed and prepared ourselves. We were going into a thick forest with seemingly no way out. Fran turned to walk towards the woods, which seemed to grow thicker as we approached. Though I lacked a heart, I could still feel something within me pounding.

This is it. The Withering Forest.

“Hm.”

Jet, you won’t be able to use projectile spells and Skills here. Be careful.

“Woof!”

We took our first step inside the forest. I thought my heart was going to explode with fear, but no such thing happened. I was already at maximum anxiety just looking at the place from afar, you see.

That said, the forest wasn’t that terrifying compared to fighting Fanatix back in the capital. I guess the trauma I had linked to this place was slowly healing. It helped that it was where Fran and I first met.

What do you think, Fran?

“Hm...it feels weird.”

Mana didn’t regenerate in the Withering Forest. Detection Skills were deactivated. Fran couldn’t use magic when we first met, and now felt awkward without it. She could feel the withering power of the forest.

Enemies will be harder to detect in the Withering Forest. Stay sharp.

“Hm.”

How are you holding up, Jet?

Jet whined as he wobbled about in his original gigantic size. His body was taking it much harder than Fran. The direwolf unconsciously relied on mana to live, so he was quite weak without it.

For starters, he couldn't use Shapeshift and Shadow Walk as well as he normally could. He could activate Shapeshift, sure, but he couldn't keep his desired shape over a long period of time. He had also unconsciously strengthened his whole body in order to support his massive size, making his size a hindrance without the mana support.

We ran into some goblins and Jet ended up obliterating them because he didn't know how to gauge his strength. He shook off the goblin blood and guts that splattered all over his fur and whined sadly.

Fran and I aren't losing the mana inside of us...

It wasn't just a matter of Skills like Enhanced Physique not activating—no, Jet's innate mana was being actively drained by the Withering Forest. He would've been crippled by now if his mana wasn't linked to mine. He was unconsciously using mana, which would always end up being sapped by the forest. It wasn't something Jet could control. It would be like telling your skin to stop breathing—it was something necessary to stay alive.

No wonder high-level monsters didn't live here. The bigger they were, the more mana they passively used, and the Withering Forest would sap them dry in an instant.

“Arf...”

Come on, we're almost out of here...Fran.

“Hm!”

We didn't need Presence Sense to hear the rustling in the woods. There was something big coming our way.

“Groar!” A two-headed bear larger than a grizzly leapt out of the bushes. Both

of its maws drooled with spit, its eyes staring at us with raging hunger.

A Twinhead Bear.

“I remember this.”

Yeah?

“Hm. It was the first thing I beat with you.”

Fran remembered every kill, and this was the monster that started it all. A monster that had been about to make a meal of her, a slave, when she ran into me. We’d survived that encounter by the skin of our teeth.

But that was all in the past. The Twinhead bear was no match for us after all we had been through, and the bear knew it too.

“Grrrrr!”

“G-Groar...”

Jet was much larger than the Twinhead, and it could feel my and Fran’s mana now that it was closer to us. It had tracked us down with its nose but—*surprise, big guy!*—its supposed prey was much stronger than it was. The bear thought about backing away, but it clenched its teeth and roared. It would fight for its dinner.

Due to the lack of powerful monsters, the Twinhead bear stood at the top of the food chain in the Withering Forest. The word ‘escape’ wasn’t part of its vocabulary.

Still, Jet killed it before a very-motivated Fran’s eyes. Killed it with a single paw swipe, in fact. Weakened as he was, there was still a huge difference in stats. Jet had no chance of losing. But seeing how healthy the bear was confirmed my suspicion that the Withering Forest was home to monsters that didn’t rely on mana to survive.

Jet put one paw on his kill and let out a satisfied grunt. He looked very proud of himself, but Fran was not entertained.

“Hrmph...”

“Arf?”

“I was going to do that...”

“R-ruff...”

Fran pouted at Jet for having stolen her kill. The Twinhead bear had a special place in her heart.

Jet approached her, whining sadly as she glared at him.

“Hmph.”

“Arf!”

“The next one’s mine.”

“Woof!”

Fran was still annoyed, but she forgave the direwolf after yanking his tail.

Fran, could you pick it up off the ground for me?

“Hm.”

Thanks. That’ll do it.

I stored the Twinhead bear away. Pocket Dimension was one Skill we could still use in the forest since its active time was so short. I asked Fran to lift the bear up—the mana drain was stronger the closer you were to the ground, after all. Even if I could store it from there, it would’ve consumed more mana than necessary.

I didn’t think monsters would attack us in this forest.

“Why not?”

You would think that weak monsters would steer clear of Jet’s presence and scent.

Monsters would ordinarily avoid us, but we’d still had several encounters in the Withering Forest so far: kobolds, goblins, and that Twinhead bear just now. It wasn’t like Jet was hiding in the shadows or anything. What would make them want to attack a giant direwolf?

“Maybe they can’t tell how strong we are.”

Must be.

Judging your opponents' strength was difficult without the use of detection Skills.

I think their sensitivity to danger might be dulled, too. There are only weak monsters in the Withering Forest, after all.

"I see."

Maybe setting up camp in the forest wouldn't be worth it. We'd have to be on guard for an attack at any moment. The monsters were too weak to hurt us, but they'd make sleep impossible.

Of course, we would only have to set up camp if we ran into a monster we couldn't handle at the outer circle of the Demon Wolf's Garden. A Rank were known to be spotted here, though, so that was a possibility. An A-Rank monster would be as strong as the lich; not something we could handle even in our powered-up state. We weren't likely to run into one, but they'd block our entrance into the Garden.

We'll figure it out once we enter the Garden. Come on, just a little bit further.

"Hm!"

"Woof!"

We were almost there...almost at the Demon Wolf's Garden. I wondered how my first home was doing.

We followed the trail of light shining through the cracks in the Withering Forest's canopy and exited the woods. Fran squinted in the bright, burning sunlight. But she soon widened her eyes again, taking in the scenery.

"So this is the Demon Wolf's Garden..."

Mwahahaha! I'm back, Garden!

"What's wrong, Teacher?"

Err...sorry. It's nothing. Anyway, do you feel anything weird around us?

"A little bit..."

It's faint. I can't make out what it is or where it's coming from.

We were a hundred meters into the Demon Wolf's Garden. The northeast

section, to be exact. The mana flow in the air was unnatural and a certain presence was prickling our skin. There was definitely something here with us, but we couldn't make out its exact location. Our Skills should've been usable now, though.

Anything, Jet?

"Woof..."

No luck either, huh?

Either this monster could trick Jet's nose or it was completely odorless.

"We'll have to stay sharp."

Yeah.

"Arf!"

We kept walking for a few minutes, detection Skills blaring. We weren't making good distance. Maybe we should throw caution to the wind and run for it.

But things weren't going to be that simple.

"Teacher!"

"Grrr!"

Fran and Jet suddenly jumped. I noticed it too, even though I was a beat slower.

It's coming from below us!

I was terrible at detecting underground things since I wasn't earthbound. Fran and Jet always had an edge over me in this department.

"Smoke?"

Get away from it. It might be poison.

"Hm!"

White smoke was seeping out of the ground. It was laced with mana, making it no natural smoke. It moved towards us as if it had a mind of its own.

I knew it! It's an evolved Gust!

I Identified the smoke to reveal that it was a B-Threat monster called the Greater Venom Gust. It possessed Physical Immunity along with impressive stealth and regenerative capabilities. Its Mana Drain, Life Drain, and Stealth were all at high levels.

It'd keep regenerating until we either completely destroyed all of the smoke or its crystal. Even its smoke was poisonous—not that it was enough to outright kill Fran and Jet, but it would drain their energy as long as they were in it, which was plenty dangerous.

We had Poison Resistance, which helped mitigate the situation, but a weaker human would have his life and mana sapped while being poisoned at the same time. The white smoke was a three-pronged attack from all sides.

The Gust covered a lot of ground, too. Smoke was already seeping out over a hundred-meter radius around Fran, maybe enough to cover a small town.

A B-Threat monster was a creature deemed capable of destroying a country, and it was easy to see why. This thing was strong enough to give a smaller country a lot of trouble.

Fran, Jet! Look for the crystal!

“Hm!”

“Woof!”

I started firing spells into the smoke as they started their search for the crystal. Lightning forked into the smoke, burning whole wafts of it. It looked like I did a lot of damage, but I was only hurting a small portion of the Greater Venom Gust's body. Barely a percentage.

Looks like Thunder Magic's not gonna cut it!

I then tried flame and wind—flame seemed best for a head-on attack. Mana Steal and Life Steal were also effective. I could see the smoke dissipate as the Gust began to lose steam. Unfortunately, more smoke came out of the ground to replenish its gaseous body.

Any luck with the crystal?

“No.”

“Woof...”

The crystal was hidden within the fog of smoke and mana. Even with Fran and Jet’s advanced senses, they found it difficult to pinpoint the exact location of the creature’s crystal.

Maybe it’s underground...

“Should we start digging?”

Yeah. Let’s get to it.

“Hm!”

It sounded like a wild guess, but it was our best lead at this point. Besides, there was no one else here but us, so we were free to use whatever spells we wanted.

Get ready! Haaaa!

“Yaaaaah!”

We cast Gravity Pressure, a land spell that crushed an area with tremendous gravity, over the ground where the smoke seeped out. The ground crushed downward, pushed by this invisible force. I was emulating something Urslars did with his Godsword, casting the spell over and over again to produce a similar effect. Ours wasn’t as good, of course.

“Did that do it?”

No. It’s still making smoke.

“Again!”

All right!

We created more pressure over a wider range of ground, adding flame and thunder spells to create explosions too. But the smoke showed no sign of stopping. What if the crystal wasn’t underground after all?

Tch. There’s no end to this—

FWIP!

Something cut through the wind as we continued our search for the Greater

Venom Gust's crystal.

"Ugh!"

Whoa!

A shock wave hit Fran, knocking her back. She managed to hold me up just in time to block whatever was cutting through the air. She was unhurt, but she would've been gravely injured had it been a direct hit.

I picked up the strange object with telekinesis.

It's some sort of crystal shard. No...it's a scale.

A crystalline scale...it possessed mana-reflecting qualities that allowed it to approach its target unnoticed. We wouldn't have seen it coming if not for the sound it'd made whooshing through the air, a sound which was rapidly multiplying as I examined it.

"Hrm!"

Stealth made up 50 percent of the scale's power. Fran smashed through them with ease once she knew what to look out for. She even managed to catch some of them with Pocket Dimension.

We wanted to go on the offense, but we didn't know where the enemy was. The attacks were coming from the northwest but they were too far for us to even see, let alone reach. We couldn't even detect their presence or mana. This thing was deliberately attacking us from way outside our effective range.

"Let's go, Teacher! Jet, stay in the shadows!"

Okay!

"Woof!"

We tried approaching our mystery sniper, but they were well-prepared. A flurry of crystal shards rained upon us along with things that exploded like bombs.

A single scale was powerful enough to instantly kill a D Rank, but they weren't our only problem. The Gust's smoke was quickly approaching.

Fran, we can't take both the Gust and the sniper at the same time! It's too

dangerous!

“Urgh...what should we do?”

We can either retreat to the Withering Forest or teleport through the Gust. The Gust might still chase us if we do, though.

“Fine. We’ll go back to the forest.” Fran was frustrated, but she took my advice to retreat. She knew how perilous the situation was.

Guess this isn’t gonna be a walk in the park.

“Hm...”

We teleported back into the Withering Forest in order to plan our next course of action.

We know the Gust won’t chase us this far.

“Hm.”

The Gust moved its gaseous body using mana, which meant the Withering Forest was strictly off-limits. The owner of the crystal scales stopped its onslaught out there too, unable to detect us because of the forest’s mana-jamming properties.

“So what now?”

We can either try to rush through the Gust or go around it.

Monsters in the Demon Wolf Garden got weaker the deeper you went in. The guild didn’t have an explanation for it, but some conjectured that it had something to do with Fenrir’s mana. Nothing more than wild speculation, really, but we had confirmation that the phenomenon actually existed. I had personally experienced it myself.

The elite monsters might not give chase if we make a run for it. Maybe.

Back when I had just reincarnated, I’d always retreated to the center of the Garden when things got too tough. Slowly but surely, I managed to conquer the Demon Wolf’s Garden, but this strategy only worked because I was a sword. I was a stealthy, inanimate object that monsters didn’t register as food. Chasing after me would be a waste of their time.

But Fran and Jet were different. They were fleshy creatures with great amounts of mana in them—perfect meals in the eyes of a powerful monster. They had ignored me when I retreated, but they might pursue Fran and Jet beyond their boundaries.

Besides, we couldn't just go beating every monster we came across. We only fought the Gust for a few minutes, and that alone used way too much energy.

The safest plan of action was to gather information on the monsters protecting the outer circle of the Garden and either fight the easiest ones or sneak around them to make it to the Garden's center.

So what now?

Fran paused. "Getting to the center of the Demon Wolf's Garden takes priority. Training can wait."

Meaning?

"We'll take the safest way to get there. Fixing you is the number one thing we have to do."

Oh. You sure?

"Hm."

I was touched, to be honest. This was battle-loving Fran we were talking about, actually willing to avoid battle for my sake. I felt loved, to be sure, but I was also impressed with how much Fran had matured. Now that I thought about it, she didn't fall asleep back in the guild library, either. Sure, she spaced out after getting bored, but there was a world of difference between that and falling asleep.

"First we'll find out who the owner of this is," Fran said, inspecting the crystal scale.

Right.

The translucent scale was actually harder than crystal. Fran could make rocks crumble like cookies, but she couldn't snap the scale despite her best efforts.

That's a great idea. A long-ranged monster should have trouble in close quarters.

The monster rained its artillery on us from over a kilometer away. It was lethal at long distances, but maybe it was crippled in close range.

We made our way to the northwest quadrant of the Demon Wolf's Garden, all while keeping an eye on it from the Withering Forest.

As we walked onward, Jet reacted to something. "Grr!"

"Is something there?"

"Woof!" Jet sniffed the air with his nose and tossed a sharp glare in the direction of the Garden. Even without mana enhancements, his sense of smell was still sharp; he'd picked up the scent of our sniper.

Uh-huh...but where is it?

Fran watched for a while. "I don't know."

Neither of us could tell where the monster was, but Jet was confident that he was pointing in the right direction.

"Lead the way, Jet."

"Woof!"

Be careful, Fran.

"Hm!"

We stepped into the Demon Wolf's Garden again with Jet taking point.

SHUNK!

"Bark!"

"Jet!"

Jet's pained cry stopped us in our tracks. We were under attack again, but couldn't have Jet avoided it? His senses were so sharpened, after all...

That was when it hit me. If he'd dodged, Fran would've taken the hit instead. His gigantic body was blocking her view and she wouldn't have been able to react fast enough. He took the attack for her.

Thanks, Jet! Aaah, it cut you to the bone...

"Woof..."

Blood was gushing out of his body.

I quickly healed him. *Fran, we can't stay behind him!*

"Hm!" Fran quickly stepped away from him, positioning herself a little bit to his side. Now she could react to whatever was coming and Jet could dodge without worrying about her.

The attacks intensified, but we made it through unscathed. Fran had my help, and Jet's reflexes were as sharp as ever. Our mysterious attacker slowed us down, but we slowly advanced into the Demon Wolf's Garden. Still, despite Jet's confidence, we had yet to catch a glimpse of our sniper.

Where is it...?

"Hm..."

And then Jet stopped. He looked ahead as if there was a monster there, yet Fran and I didn't see anything. The creature itself had stopped attacking us too, in order to conceal its position.

Jet used a shadow spell to force the monster's hand, veiling the land with shade and exposing a visual distortion twenty meters ahead.

To what shall I compare it to? A mirage? A mirror with a strange refractive index? Whatever it was, we could see the distortion now.

So that's it. It's using active camouflage!

The creature was bending light in order to blend into the environment. Caught by surprise at Jet's dark spell, it couldn't adjust its camouflage in time.

"Some kind of weird lizard?"

Where Fran saw a lizard, I saw a dinosaur. The monster was a quadruped, ten meters long and closely resembling an ankylosaurus I'd once seen in a dinosaur picture book. But where that creature was a big ol' reptile, this thing had scales made of clear crystal.

It was particularly stealthy for its size. On top of its active camouflage, we couldn't detect its presence or mana at this distance. But now that I had a visual, I could finally identify it.

That thing's a B-Threat!

The monsters in the Garden were definitely getting stronger. The outer circle was only protected by C-Threats the last time I was here!

We were facing an Invisible Death, a B-Threat monster capable of making its presence disappear by using its active camouflage. There was once a squad who stepped into the territory of an Invisible Death...and they were wiped out to the man without ever knowing what killed them. A regular soldier wouldn't be able to deal with a flurry of shots fired over a kilometer away.

Not only did it have towering stats, but it also possessed high levels of Light Magic, Thunder Magic, and Fire Magic...and more.

The crystal-like carapace covering its whole body also possessed special mana reflecting properties. The Invisible Death used this in tandem with its latent Stealth Skills. Combined with active camouflage, it could conceal its presence almost completely. What's more, it would actually stop attacking us once you got close to it.

The stronger you were in this world, the better you got at detecting people's presence and mana. It was how we scoped out our enemies. The Invisible Death's powers were specifically tuned to counter that ability. Without Jet, we'd be lost.

The encounter cemented how useful the sense of smell was in this world, especially after what happened in Alessa. Unlike presence and visuals, scent couldn't be so easily masked.

But just because we spotted the Invisible Death didn't mean the battle was won. We'd completed the arduous task of getting closer to it, but we still had to defeat it. There was a chance of it being bad at melee range since it was so specialized at stealth and long-range combat. The creature had high defense, sure, but it looked slow.

"Grr!" Jet fired a dark spell at the Invisible Death. The crystal scales had some form of mana resistance, however, and the gigantic black spears dispersed on the surface of the scales.

"Barooooo!"

The Invisible Death roared and revealed itself, knowing it had been discovered. Now the real battle had begun.

“Teacher, you’re on spells!”

Right!

“Jet, flank it from behind!”

“Woof!”

We charged at Fran’s command. She was going to attack it with a quick swipe to see what it would do.

Suddenly, she jumped to the right before she could do anything at all—something heavy had crashed right into the spot she was just at.

The tail!

“Hm!” Fran nodded and continued kicking the earth beneath her. The monster’s tail pursued her, crashing continually into the ground until she was finally out of range.

Tsk. I can’t believe it’s good at close range, too.

“Hm! That tail is pretty powerful.”

The Invisible Death resembled an ankylosaurus, especially its head and tail. That long tail had a weight at the end of it, possibly as a counterweight to increase its overall power. At this point, the ground was riddled with holes, and it was clear the thing had speed and precision to spare.

But tail swipes weren’t the only trick in the Invisible Death’s book. It was now firing its spiky crystal scales in Fran’s direction. I didn’t know how it propelled them, but the monster had projectiles as long as it had scales...and with every barrage, new crystal scales replaced the ones it had fired.

“Haaaaa!”

Still, Fran managed to avoid both scale and tail and got close enough to land a hit.

CLANG!

No, that won’t be enough!

We didn't do anywhere near enough damage. The scales were tough, but they also had mana dispersing powers, making them exceptionally resilient. Elemental Blade wouldn't do much for us here.

Fran braced herself and launched a stronger attack on the monster, but we only heard a shrill noise that sounded like a dust collector at full bore.

Whirrrr...SHUNK!

"Urgh!"

Something blasted out of the creature's tail. Fran only managed to dodge it by a hair. It was *that* fast.

So this is how he's been sniping us!

While the Invisible Death could fire the scales on its body, they weren't very precise. Its tail, though, was a whole other story. It used an explosion of mana, pressurized air, and thunder magic as accelerants. It then utilized Air Current Manipulation and Air Manipulation to stabilize its trajectory. I'd been wondering why it had thunder and fire magics but never used them in combat, and now had my answer: they were the main ingredients of its sniping game.

Fran dodged another scale shot. They were still plenty dangerous, even at point-blank range.

He's coming, Fran!

"Hm!"

The Invisible Death was trying to trample us. It wasn't particularly fast, but it more than made up for it by the sheer size of its stride.

"Barooo!"

"Hurk!"

Whose bright idea was it to get close to this guy?! Ugh, my bright idea! I'm such an idiot!

The monster could still use its two scale attacks at close range as well as its tail and body. This thing might've been even stronger up close.

Haaaa!

Which meant we just needed to get some space between us and fire our spells from there. The crystal scales might have mana-dispersing properties, but surely a powerful spell would go right through it.

I cast Thor's Hammer and Flare Explode one after another. The scales absorbed some of the damage but not all of it. The spells destroyed a portion of the crystal scales, and the Invisible Death howled in pain. Good start, but it wasn't out of the fight yet.

"Groooooar!"

Oh, crap!

"Hrm?"

I felt a large gathering of mana and teleported us a short distance away. An instant later, our former position exploded with an intense beam of energy—a light spell. Pretty much a laser beam, really. The beam gouged the earth with its heat and impact. I didn't know light spells could be strong enough to—

I didn't have time to finish that thought—because that was when the Invisible Death saw our new location and immediately launched another one of its scales at us. The scale crashed right next to us, exploding like a frag grenade. The scale-shards tore through our barriers with their mana-dispersing properties. Fran's arms and legs were torn apart but I managed to protect her vitals.

"Argh!"

Greater Heal!

Fran was gravely injured, but it was better than taking a direct hit from that light spell.

Thanks, Teacher.

I'll focus on avoiding the light spell. Be careful after we come out of teleport.

Got it.

I didn't expect the creature's firing speed to match the speed of its projectiles. I'd have to keep an eye out for mana charges.

"More spells, Teacher! Go for broke!"

All right!

We used Thor's Hammer and Flare Explode again, preparing ourselves for a multicast. Jet also took advantage of the opening and cast his dark spells.

A grand explosion engulfed the Invisible Death's body, showing the true destructive power of our spells. Over half of the crystal shell on its back was now broken, and smoke was smoldering out of it.

"Bwooooooargh!"

"We got him! Let's go!"

Right!

But we stopped just as we were about to charge.

"Huh? What's he doing?"

This thing's not an ankylosaurus. It's an armadillo!

The monster had pulled its head and limbs into its body and curled up into a ball. Its crystal scales were regenerating into even larger forms than before, and it looked like a giant was rolling on the ground. I could sense the creature charging its mana under its armor. It was biding its time for one last-ditch attempt at victory.

"What now?"

I'll pelt him with spells, but watch out for counterattacks.

"Okay. I'll leave you to it."

I wasn't just going to sit here and watch while our enemy was sitting still. I ramped up my spells and fired them at the Invisible Death, but the crystal scales had even more magic resistance than before. Thor's Hammer and Flare Explode barely did any damage. It was still firing light rays and crystal scales at us, too.

Oh, I see.

Using magic while moving around at a high speed was difficult whether you were a human or a monster. The creature waited for its opponent to launch a powerful attack and countered it afterwards.

Not really a problem for us, though. Fran was doing the dodging for the both

of us, so I was free to focus on spellcasting.

One more!

“Hm!”

I don't think I feel comfortable calling this a Kanna Kamuy after what I saw in the capital, but...

It was still my strongest attack. Kanna Kamuy was an advanced spell—a Grand Spell, they're called—and my version was nothing compared to the one I saw Velmeria use.

Still, I put my back into it! *Eat this!*

A gigantic magic circle appeared in the sky as lights flashed across it. A pillar of white lightning crashed through it—huge enough that I thought the magic circle itself would be erased—and slammed right into the Invisible Death.

“Bloaaaaaargh!”

Got it!

The monster's scales were useless against so much destructive power. The lightning pillar broke the Invisible Death out of its shell and the ensuing explosion launched its body in the air.

“Baroooo!”

“Now!”

“Woof!”

It was now completely open to attack, with half of the crystal on its body shattering into pieces. The Kanna Kamuy didn't do a lot of damage by the grand spell's standards, but it had succeeded in breaking through the Invisible Death's defenses. Its rough, boulder-like skin was now exposed.

“Grrr!” And Jet got right down to business. He howled loudly to draw the Invisible Death's attention, shifting his size over and over in order to confuse his opponent.

Having spotted an opening, Fran went in from the creature's flank. She pierced the monster with Spiral Fang, an Advanced Sword Skill. The Skill added

powerful rotations to her stab. Her target: the creature's freshly Kanna Kamuy'd back. Small scales were already growing out of its leathery hide, but it was more exposed than the rest of its body.

"Taaaah!"

"Graaaargh!"

My blade pierced the Invisible Death's shell and sank deep into its body. We couldn't detect its crystal because of the crystal scales' protection, but I felt the life drain from the giant beast.

Haaaa!

"One more!" We followed up our attack with a flame spell. The explosion engulfed us but our barrier protected us from it.

"Barooo...!" The Invisible Death groaned weakly. A gaping hole poured smoke from within its body; its insides had been scorched. We'd missed its organs, but I could see a pale blue thing sticking out of its back which I thought might be its spine.

Still, the crystal scales immediately grew back to cover its wounds...and now the Invisible Death was directing all its energy to healing itself! The wound we'd gone to such pains to inflict was already closing.

We're going to get trapped by the scales at this point!

"Hm!"

"Awoooooo!"

"Jet?"

Huh?

Jet caught up with us just as we backed away from the regenerating scales. His method of attack surprised both me and Fran—as he shrank his body and jumped *into* the wound of the Invisible Death! The crystal scales finished regenerating, but it didn't seem to bother him at all. He tore through the creature's insides, gnawing through meat, bone, and sinew, digging deeper and deeper into its heart.

“BAROOOOOOGH!”

The Invisible Death wailed louder than when it suffered a direct hit from Kanna Kamuy. It flailed its limbs about in pain and anguish. The pain of being eaten from the inside must’ve been excruciating.

“He’s wide open.”

Yeah! Let’s finish this!

We readied a Sword King Art and aimed for the monster’s head to finish the job.

“GROOOOOOAR!”

But there was a sudden surge of mana from within the Invisible Death’s body. Its crystals were now glowing white.

This doesn’t look good! I’m backing up!

“Hm!”

I teleported us to the skies and saw a powerful light emerge from the ground.

I hope you’re okay, Jet...

A dome of light had surrounded the Invisible Death. The outer rim of the dome had turned to glass, showcasing the intense heat. The dome expanded and encased the surroundings below us before bursting like a balloon.

The tremendous explosion kicked up a sandstorm. But the shock waves also blew away the flowers and bushes around it. White petals danced in the air, adorning the chaotic battlefield with a touch of beauty.

“Grr...”

“We’re coming, Jet!”

Jet was lying on the ground, smoke billowing from his body. The Invisible Death’s attack had burned him and left patches of singed fur. The heat and impact had left him missing chunks of flesh; a painful sight.

At the same time, the Invisible Death had also suffered grave injuries. It had attacked itself in order to expel Jet, a last resort only available to a creature with amazing magic resistance.

We were attacked as we were rushing to Jet's side. But this attack didn't come from the Invisible Death.

"Fire!"

"ICE JAVELIN!"

A hail of frozen spears rained upon Fran and Jet.

"Tch!"

Fran cranked her barrier to full power to cover for the direwolf. She didn't mind getting hit with a few stray bullets as long as she could protect him. Blood flowed from her wounds as he moved about.

"Who is it now...?"

"What a tasty-looking girl..."

It's an undead horde!

A Wight King, a B-Threat monster, had joined the battle. A withered corpse of an undead, he looked a lot like the lumbering mummy we'd encountered back in Alessa. This one looked a little more regal with his red robes.

It had chosen to attack at this particular moment to scavenge like a hyena. He had approached us with teleportation—Timespace Magic.

A Wight King usually attacked by summoning countless weaker undead. The one attacking us only had six undead in its horde, but each was as powerful as the last. Four Wight High Wizards, two Wight Imperial Guards. All of them C-Threats.

This particular Wight King had settled for quality over quantity. "I set up a net in these plains in order to sense teleportation. What a tremendous catch!"

"Baroooo!" As for the Invisible Death, it was as vigorous as ever. At this rate, it'd soon regenerate to full health.

"Urgh..."

"Woof..."

Fran and Jet slowly got back on their feet once their wounds were healed.

Should we keep fighting...?

“Teacher, look!”

Huh...? What the hell is it doing here? Is it chasing us?

Fran pointed at a peculiar white smoke which wormed its way towards us... the Greater Venom Gust was back.

We were now surrounded by three B-Threats. An A Rank adventurer should be able to solo a single B-Threat. We were now faced with three creatures which would test the limits of Amanda and Forlund’s abilities. We were stronger than we used to be, sure, but we had yet to surpass them. It was a bad situation, to say the least.

This is very bad...!

I wondered if we should continue fighting at all. The Invisible Death was still wounded, and as pesky as the Gust was, it wasn’t as powerful as the rest. I certainly couldn’t think of how to get away from this encounter without a fight.

Teacher, can you spot the smoke’s crystal?

I can’t sense it at all! What about you guys?

Nope.

Ruff...

Did the Gust extend its smoke while hiding its crystal? Was it actually within the smoke before us, concealed by some magic or Skill?

“What about the undead’s crystal?”

I can’t get a read on him, either!

B-Threat monsters probably had ways of concealing their crystals’ locations. I couldn’t even begin to sense the presence of crystals in the Wight King or his minions. Considering the Skills it had, magic probably had something to do with it.

“Fire Javelin!”

Fran launched a spell at the Wight King, but before it could hit, the flaming spear wavered and dispersed.

“Pointless! But delectable!” The undead cackled as he absorbed the spell. Considering how powerful the spell had been, he’d probably used a particularly strong Mana Drain. We would just end up feeding the Wight King at this point.

“Icicle Burst!”

“ICICLE BURST!”

“Urk!”

They’re not giving us time to think!

The wights rained ice spells upon us. We managed to burn them up with a flame spell, but we couldn’t strategize under their pressure.

Teacher, above!

I see...on it!

“Hm!”

I teleported us to the skies, Fran stepped on the back of my blade, and I took us higher with Telekinetic Air Ride.

Well?

“The smoke’s still coming after us.”

At least we got the wights off our backs!

“The lizard’s an easier target, too.”

The Invisible Death’s attacks were easiest to avoid at mid-distance—that way, we could sense its mana every time it started an attack. It was too fast at close-range, and downright undetectable at long-range.

The wights lacked flight, so their spells couldn’t hit us at this range. Whatever reach they had didn’t matter when the attacks were this inaccurate.

We had no way of defeating the Gust, but we could just ignore it for now. Besides, the wights didn’t seem to like it, either. Undead relied on mana to function, and the Gust sucked the mana right out of them. Even the Wight King avoided the white smoke.

With the Gust keeping the Wights in check, getting away from the Invisible

Death was a possibility after all.

“Bark, bark!”

What is it, Jet?

Jet was trying to tell us something as we dodged attack after attack. “Grrr!”

Did you find out where the big lug’s crystal is?

“Woof!”

I see! Jet’s expedition into the Invisible Death’s body wasn’t solely to attack it. He’d also found the location of its crystal!

“Teacher, I want to deal with that lizard here.”

Yeah...all right. Personally, I wanted to get the hell out of dodge while we could, but there was no stopping Fran once she got motivated.

“I won’t use Sword God Form.”

What?

“Using it is a temporary fix. I want to be able to win without it. What should we do?”

Fran knew that she needed to conserve her energy; this might not be our last battle for the day. But she had yet to figure out how to beat the Invisible Death *without* Sword God Form.

All right. How about we... I explained to her the battle plan I just cooked up. It was going to be difficult, but Fran was ready for the challenge.

“I see...”

Can you do it?

“I’ll just have to!”

Great. Jet, you show us the crystal’s location by attacking it. We’ll take over from there.

“Hm!”

“Woof!”

Jet accelerated downwards, firing dark spears. They wouldn't do much damage, but they'd tell us exactly where the monster's crystal was located.

There! Close to the tail, the thickest part of the crystals.

"Grr!" Jet rushed the Wight King and his horde to keep them in check, using Shadow Walk to herd them in and distract them.

The Invisible Death kept its eyes on the direwolf, remembering the pain Jet had inflicted.

"Let's go."

Right!

We then quietly began our attack.

First, we'll stop its movement!

"Hm."

I used land spells to dig sinkholes beneath the monster's four feet. I then encased its feet with more earth to render it immobile for a while. Being turtle-shaped, the Invisible Death would find it difficult to move without proper footing. This thing was fast for its size, so we needed it to stay put for our plan to work.

"Barooo?"

"Haaaa!" Fran cast Kanna Kamuy on the confused Invisible Death. A thick pillar of lightning crashed into the monster. It was much weaker than my Kanna Kamuy, but we just needed it to crack through the creature's crystal defenses. Fran was casting the spell so I could focus on the ensuing attack.

Good job, Fran!

"Hm!"

Our real attack was a full-powered, aerial Telekinetic Catapult. Fran trained her eyes on her target below and threw me as hard as she could.

I used wind, flame, and the thunder spell Magnetic Manipulation all at once. I'd always used magnetic force as an accelerant. It had even come in handy back in the capital when we'd dealt the finishing blow on Fanatix. Still, the force it

provided was nothing compared to flame and wind spells. It only provided the initial snap of acceleration.

But I had learned a great deal from the Invisible Death. I used telekinesis to make a long, coiling gun barrel, like the Invisible Death's tail, and applied Magnetic Manipulation on it. This allowed me to accelerate all the way through the barrel to achieve speeds never before possible. This technique was harder to pull off, of course, and accordingly cost way more mana.

Yaaaaaaaah!

My blade plunged deep into the carapace—a carapace that Fran had just cleared of crystal scales. Still, I couldn't quite pierce it. Even at this speed it wasn't enough. That's a B-Threat for you, I guess. You have to pull out all the stops.

"BROOOOAAAGH!"

FRAAAAN!

"Hm!"

But we had taken this, too, into account. Now our plan could truly begin.

Fran fell quickly from the sky to anticipate the Invisible Death's attempt to expel me. She was wrapped in Flashing Thunderclap to accelerate her descent. She looked like a bolt of black lightning, flying down to strike me—specifically to strike my handle, which I had transformed into the shape of a tray.

Let's go, Fran!

"Haaaaa!"

Fran rode the black lightning down from the sky at full speed and kicked my handle into the beast.

"GROAAAARGH!"

I was plunged deeper into the Invisible Death's body with Fran's *Super Inazuma Kick*.

"BAROOOO!"

"Urgghhh!"

I could hear the sound of Fran's bones shattering as the creature's carapace also shattered. My blade also cracked, adding to the cacophony.

My durability was instantly shot but I couldn't let this chance slip by. I Transmogrified myself, extending my blade further into the beast. I infiltrated its insides, gouging meat and sinew out of the way.

"BRAAAAGH!"

I felt the monster's death throes as I cracked into its crystal. But I didn't have time to celebrate.

"Hurk...!" Fran's leg was twisted at a cruel angle from the impact of kicking me. It wasn't just her leg, either. Her hips and spine were bent out of shape. Her condition was as critical as my durability.

But with that...we've won!

"Hm...!"

"Bloooorg..."

Immense satisfaction. The mana rushing through my blade was unprecedented. It was beyond the demon we defeated in the Goblin Dungeon, and he had also been a B-Threat. Fran and Jet also leveled up, but we didn't have time to think about that right now.

I quickly stored the Invisible Death's remains away and returned to Fran's side.

Let's get outta here!

"Hm..."

"Woof!"

We escaped the battlefield as I barraged Fran with heals.

Because we were in the air now, the Wight King had trouble attacking us—we were too far up for his attacks to be accurate.

"Teacher. Higher..."

I know! Don't talk right now! You're so injured that it's taking a while for the healing to kick in!

“Woof!”

We gained altitude until we were over a hundred meters in the air.

Now we just need to lose the Gust...huh?

“It’s running away?”

Finally healed, Fran had turned to look at our pursuer.

“Woof!”

The Greater Venom Gust had been on our heels the whole time, but now it was suddenly losing velocity. I supposed it was restricted by wherever its crystal was located.

I guess we should’ve taken the sky route.

“Hm.”

“Woof.”

We should go higher and go right for the center.

But something happened then.

“Huh?”

What the...! This is bad!

“W-woof!”

We were suddenly thrown off balance. I lost my buoyancy and started nosediving like a paper airplane. Fran was doing her best to hold on, but Jet was in an awful spot. He was trying to use Air Hop to gain footing, but the Skill wouldn’t activate. He paddled his legs in the air like a dog in a funny cartoon, but there was nothing funny about this situation.

Fran tried to use Air Hop to catch up, but it wouldn’t work for her, either.

“Huh?”

Fran!

Fran and Jet whizzed down from the sky. In my panic, I tried to teleport over to them, but no dice. It felt like we were back in the Withering Forest again—like the same phenomenon, even.

The Gust wasn't out of its effective range at all! It was trying to avoid this thing!

The higher I went, the stronger the mana drain. As if to prove this hypothesis, I was able to use telekinesis again once I got low enough. Sure, it cost a lot more, but I wasn't one to complain at this point. Fran and Jet also finally managed to use Air Hop to regain their footing.

I didn't fly too high the last time I was in the Garden since I was afraid of drawing attention to myself. And I certainly hadn't expected to find the mana drain phenomenon in the skies...

You okay, Fran?

"Hm! But the smoke is on us again!"

"Grr!"

Was the gas waiting for us to fall? Was it just persistent? Either way, the white smoke was surrounding us again.

We'll go higher again!

"What? But..."

We'll just have to walk the line!

Escaping to the skies wasn't a bad plan. It was the same concept as retreating to the Withering Forest. The Gust would stop following us, but we would have to manage our mana use and find the right altitude.

It's going to be hard, but we don't have a choice!

"Okay."

"Woof!"

We increased altitude to escape the white smoke. Maintaining altitude was a lot harder than it looked; there were no landmarks in the sky to keep you level. The horizon was our best bet, but even flying towards it caused some changes in our altitude.

After falling multiple times, we eventually found the optimal flight altitude. The Gust didn't ascend, and we didn't fall despite having to expend more mana

than usual.

Still, I couldn't get us out of here with teleport, and teleportation wasn't very precise aside from short hops. Anything above mid-distance was difficult, and the mana drain around us would make its precision even worse. Skills couldn't be used right after a teleport either, and even Fran would panic if she ended up upside down after a teleport. The risk of an accident was too great.

Short-range teleportation was more precise, but the cost was far too high because of our current environment. Air hopping our way to our destination was the simplest course of action.

The Gust persisted after us for only five minutes or so. We were getting closer to the center, so maybe the area itself was keeping it out. Whatever the reason, I was thankful to have that deadly smoke out of our hair.

Our current altitude also allowed us to bypass whatever monsters would've been on the ground. We ran into some bird monsters, but they were weak enough that we could just scare them off.

Now that we had some leeway, I looked into the Skills I received after fighting the Invisible Death. I already had Light Magic, Thunder Magic, and Scale Regeneration, but there were four new Skills which caught my eye. One of them was what you might call a curiosity, albeit a useless one.

First there was Mana Disruption, which was how the crystal scales got its mana-disrupting properties. I equipped it, and it did work as advertised, but there was a huge problem: it disrupted Mana Steal and most of my other Skills. If my spells might end up having adverse effects on Fran, it wasn't something I'd want to leave equipped.

Next was Shooting Compensation. The benefit of this Skill was simple enough: it increased the accuracy of long-range attacks, which meant better accuracy for Telekinetic Catapult and spells. Passive skill that it was, I could immediately feel the difference once I equipped it. It wasn't that my vision got better, but I felt more sensitive to targets over longer distances. It was as if I could see them more clearly, boosting my confidence.

What an interesting Skill.

Third was Light Dispersion. It created a semicircle field, which reflected the lights that hit it. However, its output was low and it couldn't reflect incoming light spells. It was best used for natural and weaker light sources.

This Skill was how the Invisible Death achieved its active camouflage. but replicating it was a difficult task. Practically impossible, really. I had to calculate everything from the amount of light being reflected to the angle of refraction. I could only use it with paltry success, achieving nowhere near the perfect camouflage of the Invisible Death. No wonder it was an elite monster. The Invisible Death could do all of this solely on instinct. Still, I could still see myself using the Skill sometime.

Finally, we had Crystal Morph, which did exactly as its name suggested. This was probably used to turn the Invisible Death's scales to bullets as well as turn it into reactive armor when under attack. Very interesting, but I had no way of using it.

The Invisible Death was basically a giant turtle with a railgun and laser beams. Reactive armor, radar jamming, and active camouflage. The more I thought about it, the more it sounded like a *Zoid*.

But I'd learned a lot from that turtle. Telekinetic Catapult was stronger than ever now. although I couldn't use this newfound force wherever I wanted. Stronger telekinesis was required in order to stabilize my body when I launched myself. I'd need to pick and choose what Skills to use during Telekinetic Catapult.

Using telekinesis to stabilize my trajectory would result in a loss of speed. Using more Skills and spells to compensate for that would eat up more mana—perhaps exponentially so—for a disproportionate increase in damage.

As I turned these things over in my head, our destination came into view. The sight brought back so many memories that I had to stop and shout.

Fran, I can see it!

“That one?”

Those are the ruins, all right. The ruins where everything began!

Chapter 3:

Return to the Pedestal

THE DILAPIDATED RUINS were located in the center of the Demon Wolf's Garden. Years of wind and rain had weathered it, staining its once-pristine stone. Moss and weeds had overwhelmed the evenly spaced structures, those mysterious ruins whose purpose was unknown to this day. At the center of it all was a circular plaza.

"Is that the pedestal you were talking about?"

Yeah, but...something's not quite right here.

"What do you mean?"

Well, the pedestal itself is missing.

The pedestal, the home where I first awakened, was nowhere to be found.

Fran pointed to various objects in the ruins, asking me if they were the pedestal I was talking about, but none of them were right.

What remained of the pedestal was a patch of land in the center of the plaza untouched by weeds. Something had been removed from that spot recently, and—looking from above—one could definitely tell that was where the pedestal *used* to be. Grass was beginning to sprout there now, taking the place that pedestal had occupied until a few months ago.

Let's take a closer look.

"Hm."

"Woof!"

We landed on the spot where the pedestal used to be. Fran tapped the stone pavement while Jet sniffed out the ground. There was nothing strange about the place so far.

It's not here...

"Are you sure we're in the right place?"

Yeah. I'll never forget this place as long as I live.

Suddenly, Fran and Jet disappeared as my surroundings turned white. I was in the white space again. It didn't take me by surprise. No, I was getting used to this by now.

You're here.

I am.

The same familiar voice of the man greeted me.

I don't see the pedestal anywhere, though. What happened to it?

The sacred vessel was hidden away after it had completed its task. But I suppose we will be needing it again. Tell Fran and Jet to back away. I'll materialize the pedestal.

Sacred vessel, huh? I *knew* that the thing was no ordinary pedestal!

I somehow consented to the man's request and, before I knew it, the world around me had returned. Fran and Jet were oblivious to what just happened to me, but I told them to back off from the empty space.

Fran looked puzzled, but said, "Okay."

"Woof."

They took a few steps back and the pedestal started to come into existence. There was static around it like an old television as it materialized, and its transparent form made it look like a hologram in a sci-fi movie. A surge of mana ran through the pedestal before finally becoming a solid object.

It was as if the pedestal had emerged from the land itself instead of being transported from some other place. The strange surge of mana had brought it here had come from the ground, after all. Wherever it had come from, though, one thing was certain: this was the pedestal I called home.

Here it is. No doubt about it. The pedestal... My pedestal.

Only a few months had passed, but I was feeling very nostalgic. If I had tear ducts, I'd be crying right now.

"So, this is your house?"

I wouldn't really call it a house. More like a one-bedroom apartment.

"What now?" Fran asked.

Her question was answered by a deep voice which came from behind us.

"Fran, put the sword—Teacher—into the pedestal."

"Who are you?"

Fran turned around to see a man with slicked-back silver hair. A dandy with casual attire. He was somewhat see-through, like a ghost. This was her first meeting with the man, but I recognized him at first glance.

"You'll know soon enough. But you need to put Teacher in the pedestal."

Fran gazed suspiciously at this mystery man who knew her name. He didn't look like the most trustworthy character, to be sure.

Still, he continued gently, "You don't know me, but I know you. I've been watching you from within Teacher all this time."

"Within Teacher?"

He's right.

Although we didn't use Essence of Falsehood, we knew that he wasn't lying. That wasn't quite the same as saying we trusted him, admittedly, but it was something. His diction was of a man who didn't have to worry about being caught in a lie.

I felt an odd connection with this man, somehow. Nothing vague like fate or destiny but something more concrete. It was as if we were attached to each other. I didn't know if our mana connection could qualify as "concrete," but it certainly felt like it.

It'll be all right, Fran. Put me in the pedestal.

"Fine..." Fran approached the pedestal after I reassured her.

Can you reach it?

"Yeah, no problem."

Fran switched me to her other hand and plunged me in the pedestal. A warmth—no, a fire—engulfed my blade, then. But it wasn't uncomfortable. It

wasn't a burning fire which felt like it would melt my blade. This fire was relaxing, like bathing in a hot spring. I'd felt a similar sensation when Aristeia was fixing me.

"Are you okay, Teacher?"

Okay? I feel fantastic!

"Good," Fran sighed with relief, assured nothing was wrong with me after hearing my voice. As nostalgic as this place was for me, it was still foreign ground for her. She couldn't help but worry.



“Everything is ready now,” the man said as he walked to the pedestal.

“Ready for what?”

“For the reinforcement of Teacher’s seal.”

My seal?

“Don’t worry. I’ll explain everything to you today, or at least what I am permitted to tell. You’ll be much more stable now that you’re in the pedestal. You shouldn’t have any problems with your memories, either.”

Memories?

“Memories?” Fran and I said in unison. *What was he talking about?*

“Yes. To put it simply, the seal on your memories might be coming undone.”

“And that’s bad?”

“It would be the worst thing that could happen to him. I’ll explain that in due time, also. Just know that the door to his memories is stabilized when he’s in the pedestal.”

So someone really *had* sealed away my memories...for my own good, by the sound of it.

“I’ll start with telling you who I am.”

“Okay.”

Go for it.

The man snapped his fingers and created a simple chair out of the earth. He wasn’t using his own powers, per se. He was using my Land Magic and my mana. No—perhaps it would be better to call it *our* mana. Whatever powers I had were also his.

“It’s going to take a while, so have a seat. Fortunately, monsters don’t like coming to these ruins.”

“Hm.”

“Feel free to lie down, Jet.”

“Woof.” Jet obeyed him like a housecat. He understood that the man was

above him in the hierarchy. Perhaps he treated the man like his master because of his connection with me.

“Now. Please, allow me to introduce myself.”

“Hm.”

Finally. I watched the man’s face, my non-existent heart thumping in my chest. A good-looking face with a rugged and wild look. *Stop! What am I thinking?*

Was this the suspension bridge effect? Was I mistaking anxiety for attraction?

Teacher?

I was freaking out too much. I needed to pay attention!

“My name is Fenrir. I am the former Godbeast who, having consumed the Evil One, became a Fiendbeast. I’m also the tenant currently sealed in your soul.”

Fran and I were shocked by this introduction. I’d known there was a chance he was Fenrir, but that didn’t make the confirmation less surprising. I was so shocked I thought I might shout out loud.

“Fenrir? The S-Threat monster?”

“The very same.”

I knew it...

“Looks like you’ve had this hunch for a while, Teacher. I was going to tell you sooner, but things didn’t go as planned.”

“Why not?”

“I’ll get to it soon enough. First, let me tell you about myself.”

His name was Fenrir. This human guise was simply a means of communicating with us—his real form was that of a giant wolf standing over a hundred meters tall. He didn’t give us his specific measurements, of course, but he boasted that he could kill an Invisible Death with a single bite so, y’know. I extrapolated a bit.

“A long time ago, I was once called the Godbeast.”

Does that make you related to the gods somehow? Or did you just call yourself that?

“Calling myself the Godbeast would be kind of embarrassing, don’t you think?” Fenrir said with a wry smile.

So...

“You’re right. My master is one of the Ten Great Gods, the Goddess of the Silver Moon.”

I see.

I then recalled my conversation with Forlund. Forlund’s Extra Skill, Beloved of the Sword God, allowed him to analyze enchanted swords and make copies of them. He told me that he saw a strange sight when he analyzed me.

A man thought to be me was conversing with women thought to be servants of the gods. One of the maidens had the emblem of the Goddess of the Silver Moon about her person. The scene definitely had something to do with my reincarnation.

“I was tasked by the gods to devour the pieces of the Evil One and purify them. That was why I was born with the ability to absorb the powers of those I consumed.”

Which would be the source of my own crystal absorbing powers. If I was hearing him right, Fenrir was apparently birthed by the gods themselves.

Does that mean you’re a direct servant of the gods?

“Yes. I could hardly call myself the Godbeast otherwise. On the first day I descended to this earth, I defeated a piece of the Evil One and devoured it.”

I’m surprised you could find one so easily.

I’d thought the Evil One’s fragments roamed the lands in the past, but this was not so.

“Fools yearning for power broke the seal. I was originally created in order to defeat that piece of the Evil One.”

Afterwards, Fenrir found places with comparatively weaker seals on the

pieces and defeated them, too. He now had four pieces of the Evil One in total, including the first. Fitting for the wolf called the Fiend-Devouring Godbeast.

The people venerated Fenrir as the mouthpiece, messenger, and beast of the gods. The Godbeast's veneration rivaled that of the gods themselves. But the people abandoned their faith after Fenrir went berserk and started attacking them.

"The Evil One's conviction is far greater than the gods had expected. I couldn't purify his Malice, but was corrupted myself."

There were no side effects when Fenrir ate the first piece of the Evil One.

"But those side effects, I suspect, were always there. My physical appetite increased, as did my lust for destruction. These appetites drove me to find more pieces so I could purify them faster."

In the end, Fenrir could no longer resist the Evil One's whispers to '*destroy everything*,' and he went berserk. Death and destruction, far beyond the breaking of the seal of a piece of the Evil One, descended upon Jillbird. Several nations were destroyed, affecting millions of lives.

Things would've been worse if he had lost complete control, but he managed to retain some of his reason.

"I was lost in a cycle of resistance and destruction." He paused. "Do you remember the lich you fought at the sky isle? I was a lot like him at the time."

The lich's grudge and personality had fought for control of his body. When one side of him was asleep, the other was awake. The same thing happened with Fenrir and his corrupted self.

"When I finally managed to take control of myself, I used the last of my energy to come here. The Withering Forest didn't exist back then."

"Really?"

"Yes. The gods created it for me to prevent the pieces of the Evil One within me from getting out."

Wait...so that means...!

"The pieces of the Evil One are sealed away here. Four of them fused

together, to be exact. Quite powerful ones, too...”

We were so shocked at this that Fran, Jet, and I couldn’t help but look at the ground beneath us.

The man didn’t seem to judge our shock. “I know how you feel, but we’ll be all right. The seal upon this place is still strong.”

Are you sure?

“Yes.”

Good... I’d been worried that this was all because the seal inside me was weakening, but it looked like he wasn’t about to tell us that the Evil One’s seal was falling apart.

They say that the Evil One was torn apart and sealed away. How’d that happen?

“Good question. The gods were the ones responsible for that.”

“So they made it after the fact?”

“That’s right.”

Fenrir didn’t have a particular goal in mind when he came to this location. He was only looking for a place with no people or animals for him to harm.

“A Godbeast cannot kill itself. This is the truth of all messengers of the gods.” And so, Fenrir had searched for a place where he could do no harm. “It was too difficult for the gods to separate the pieces of the Evil One I had consumed. And then a human showed up.”

“A human?”

A task too difficult for the gods? What could this human possibly do about it?

“A Godsmith named Elmera. Her Godsword Cherubim was deemed too dangerous by the gods, so she roamed the lands looking for a place to dispose of it.”

Then I understood. A Godsmith would be able to help Fenrir’s situation. And the fact that it was Elmera made me pay close attention to whatever he had to say next.

The Godsmith Elmera. Creator of Cherubim...

Meaning she was the one who'd created the sword part of me. It was strange, now that I thought about it. I recognized myself primarily as a sword despite being formerly human. My memories of my time as a human were quite strong when I first came to this world, but after living as a sword, I'd kind of gotten used to it. Elmera was my creator; I didn't think of her as a parent, but that was the closest word that could describe it.

"Elmera."

"That's right," he said. "You know, when she and I met, we almost ended up killing one another."

Wait, what?

"You fought her?"

"Yes. Elmera came to the plains after hearing rumors about my presence."

That made sense. She wouldn't have met Fenrir by accident.

"If Cherubim was going to be discarded, she might as well use its full power to defeat the rabid Fenrir," Fenrir said. "At least, that's what I believe she thought."

How did she end up helping you?

"I was still fighting for control back then. I didn't care if she killed me. But the gods saved me at the behest of the Goddess of the Silver Moon."

They called upon Elmera and tasked her with aiding Fenrir. She accepted the task.

"It was a divine order, after all. But I think she was just happy Cherubim would have a chance to continue to exist."

Elmera was a Godsmith like Aristeia. She didn't want her Godswords to be destroyed.

In order to save Fenrir, his soul needed to be separated from that of the Evil One. The gods devised a plan to pull it free while leaving the Evil One's soul trapped within Fenrir's physical body.

“But they would need somewhere to store my soul. A dismembered soul would lose much of its life force.”

Without a vessel, Fenrir’s soul wouldn’t last very long. The Godsword Cherubim was chosen to become his vessel.

“My body lies deep beneath the garden, sealed together with the Evil One. My soul was meant to sleep within the discarded Godsword.”

And so the Fiendbeast Fenrir was no more, and Jillbird was saved.

But that wasn’t happily ever after.

“Indeed?”

Of course not. I’m not in the picture yet. There has to be more.

I wouldn’t have needed to be reincarnated if everything had worked out perfectly. I now knew for certain that my reincarnation was no coincidence.

“You’re right. Although it *is* happily ever after for my original body. The gods sealed it away and erected a barrier around it.”

“A barrier?” Fran asked.

The Withering Forest?

“And the sky over it. They were made to be the first line of defense in the event of the Evil One’s return. They also drain the mana of everything around it, meaning that the Evil One is being constantly purified as he sleeps beneath these ruins. Little by little, it weakens him.”

The barrier was the reason for the distribution of monsters in the Demon Wolf’s Garden. The Withering Forest also assisted in the accumulation of mana in the Garden, making it a fruitful place for monsters to multiply. The gods then used their crystals to aid the purification process.

Monsters could procreate, but they could also spawn from mana that had grown stagnant. In the latter case, crystals first appeared in the wild, followed by monsters that formed around them. But the crystals of creatures born from excess mana would’ve been drained by the divine barrier beforehand, thereby creating weaker monsters. The barrier was stronger the closer you got to the ruins, which was why the monsters near the center of the Garden were

significantly weaker compared to those at the outer rim. Meanwhile, the monsters born from natural processes could feel their mana being sapped when they approached the ruins, causing them to flee.

“Will Jet be okay?” asked Fran.

“He’ll be all right. The Withering Forest drains mana from everything inside it, but the Garden chooses its victims.”

Jet was safe from the barrier’s effects because my mana was registered here. The gods really did think of everything.

“The pieces of the Evil One inside my body are purified daily by the mana collected in the barrier. No problems there. The real problem lies with my soul.”

“Why’s that?”

“Put simply, my soul couldn’t be completely separated from the Evil One.”

The gods had originally intended to seal Fenrir’s soul within Cherubim and purify the Evil One’s power over him over thousands (if not tens of thousands) of years. But the Evil One’s corruption ran deeper than they expected, and Fenrir’s soul would only erode as time went on.

That’s rough. Honestly, it sounds...terrible.

“You don’t know the half of it. I was in quite the state at the time. Godswords are created to battle the pieces of the Evil One. The blade was meant to protect me as long as I remained sealed within it, but...” Fenrir paused. “The Evil One’s powers were far too strong. I suppose having four pieces of him inside of you can do that.”

The gods couldn’t just sit there and wait, so they focused on Fenrir’s ability to take on the powers of whatever he ate. With it, powerful monsters could be consumed to heal his soul.

Except Fenrir wasn’t corporeal, so how could he eat? That’s when they came up with their plan to fuse Fenrir’s soul to the sword. Whatever the sword cut down would go into recovering his soul.

Why couldn’t the gods just heal your soul themselves?

“I am only a vassal of the gods, and thus do not comprehend all of their

ways...but they are gods bound by rules. They cannot freely intervene in the world below.”

Made sense. The gods only wielded their powers to the extent permitted by their laws. Otherwise, the world would be at the mercy of godly whims at all times.

“Some of the gods banded together to make the basis of what was to become you: a sword which could absorb crystals to heal me.”

“What about the user?”

“Who knows? I’m sure the gods had someone in mind, but there was a problem they had to overcome.”

“What problem?”

“The Evil One. Even if they completed my restoration, it wasn’t as if his powers would suddenly be weakened. The corruption would continue, and eventually, no one would be able to wield the sword.”

“Right.”

So how’d they solve that problem?

Fenrir chuckled at my question. He wasn’t making fun of me, but he had a mischievous smile on his face.

“You. That’s how.”

Uhhh. Me?

“What do you mean by that?”

“What do you think is the most dangerous of the Evil One’s powers?”

“Umm...”

His most dangerous power...

His very existence was dangerous enough, wasn’t it?

“His ferocity in battle?” he continued. “His tenacity? The Fiends he creates? No. The most terrifying of all the Evil One’s powers is his dominion over others.”

The gods had some degree of control over all their vassals. The Goddess of

Chaos had dominion over the creatures of the dungeon. The Beast God had dominion over beastmen, beasts, and insects. While not absolute, these dominions were very difficult to resist.

I'm amazed they don't have absolute control over their vassals. You can resist them?

"Let's take beastmen as an example. An ordinary beastman couldn't resist the Beast God's commands, but someone as powerful as the Beast King should be able to disregard them. Not that I know of anyone who would do such a thing."

I imagine people would be happy that their god chose them.

"One would imagine."

So much for the relationship between gods and men. But what about the Evil One and his vassals? Did he only have dominion over Fiends?

"No," said Fenrir. "He has dominion over all born within this world."

Vassals were technically beings created by their respective gods. The Beast God created the Godbeast, so its beastmen descendants were still under its dominion.

"Before the Evil One fell," Fenrir continued, "he was the God of War, who acted as counselor to the gods."

Which meant that the War God had assisted the entire pantheon at the moment of creation. The Evil One retained his dominion because he'd had a hand in creating everything, but his dominion wasn't as strong as the other gods because of his minor participation.

As for how vassals of the gods could rebel against their patron gods in the first place, it was because the Evil One had taken part of their dominion.

"When he fell, he changed his powers to focus on that dominion."

What? Then how is anyone supposed to beat him?

"It would be difficult for an ordinary being to defeat a piece of the Evil One. The only ones who can challenge him are Godsword users who can resist his evil influence."

Okay...but how do I fit into all of this? I'm just your run-of-the-mill Japanese Earthling.

I was currently a discarded Godsword, sure, but I'd been an ordinary office worker in my past life. Just another otaku salaryman who liked manga, anime, and video games.

"The fact that you were born on Earth makes all the difference."

What...? Oh! Oh, I get it now!

"Go on."

Anyone born in this world has a chance of being taken over by the Evil One. But that doesn't apply to me because I'm not of this world!

"Correct."

The plan was to fuse Fenrir's crystal-draining system to an Earthling's soul to prevent the Evil One from taking over. I was like a filter or a barrier; Fenrir and the others would be safe as long as I was around.

Well, that shoe has finally dropped. I'd been wondering why an ordinary person like me was summoned here. Apparently, my being born on Earth made all the difference. But I still don't know why I was chosen out of everyone on Earth, though. Was it random?

"It may seem like chance to you, but there were requirements to be fulfilled."

Really? So it wasn't random? I was kind of flattered. I felt somehow... validated.

"Yes. First, it depends on the shape of your soul. I don't know the details, but a soul needs to have a particular shape for it to become the personality of a sword. That's what the gods told me, anyway. The core of the sword, forged by the Goddess of Chaos using her dungeon system, is also crucial. Compatibility with that system is said to be essential."

The dungeon system?

"That's all I know. I don't know where or what the 'dungeon system' they spoke of is. But the way you collect points to acquire new powers is very similar to that of a dungeon master."

That must be why I was registered as a vassal of the Goddess of Chaos. She had said that I was still considered one of hers, which meant I might be a vassal of other gods, too. The Goddess of the Silver Moon, probably.

“Your personality also matters. You were going to be the personality of a powerful sword, after all. We had to make sure you were suited to the task.”

I’m pretty sure I wasn’t a saint. If there’s anything I could be sure of it was my wealth of desires and bad taste.

“The gods said it was better that you were ordinary. Too good a person, and they would be overwhelmed by self-righteousness, proclaiming their own brand of justice as the truth. Of course, we couldn’t have any bad guys, either. A good heart with an average personality was the best.”

I guess they wanted someone whose motto was ‘everything in moderation.’

“And then there’s your belief system. No atheists, but no fanatics, either. We couldn’t have someone proclaiming their god as the one true god here; it wouldn’t fly. And your mind needed to be open enough to adapt to life in this world.”

As Fenrir listed the criteria, a certain type of person came to my mind which fit all of them: the Japanese otaku.

They had a habit of looking down on nice people, sure, but they didn’t have the guts to commit atrocities. They were quick to pray to their gods if they needed anything (just in case any of them were listening), and they understood the fantastic worlds of light novels and video games. Your mileage may vary, of course, but...

Huh. Maybe that was why Japanese otaku kept becoming the protagonists of the isekai genre! Maybe the isekai stories currently flooding the Earth were written by returnees from other worlds...

“For a soul to be summoned to this world, we needed a human who was dying or dead. Their souls were apparently easier to summon. All of this narrowed them down to a handful of appropriate souls.”

A soul needed the right shape, personality, and needed to be close to death. Not many candidates there. The more I learned, the slimmer the odds seemed.

It seemed less like a plan and more like a gamble.

“I think you were the fifth candidate since the gods started looking. The four people before weren’t enthused about reincarnating into a sword in a world where killing was the norm. They refused. Fortunately for us, you agreed. And so the sword was completed.”

I wasn’t the only one who fulfilled the criteria, then? Well, it sure made me thankful to the previous four candidates for refusing to reincarnate. If not for them, I would’ve never met Fran.

“The Goddess of the Nether summoned you, sealed away your memories, and sealed your personality in the sword.”

That’s what I’ve been wanting to ask you. Why erase my memories? What kind of memories were they?

“They were erased for your own sake. You were human, after all, and you were about to be turned into a sword. Lingering memories of your human senses would have driven you mad.”

Fanatix had said the same thing. A man can’t take being a sword.

“She likely sealed the memories of your quirks and desires, which would have had a great impact on your emotional stability.”

If a human was going to live as a sword and stay sane, then his humanity had to be cordoned off.

So I’m guessing there’s a lot more memories that I’m missing aside from the reincarnation process.

“Correct. The seal on those memories was supposed to be undone once you got used to being a sword. You probably don’t remember, but we explained this to you before reincarnating and you agreed to it.”

I knew I must have. Given a choice between going insane and losing part of my memories, I would’ve definitely picked the latter.

There was still the mystery of why I agreed to reincarnate to begin with. But considering I was dying at that point, I probably just wanted to live, even if it was as a sword. Why would someone refuse life in the first place? Wasn’t

having your memories sealed away better than dying? Maybe they were afraid of their personalities changing, of losing themselves. They were going to become swords after all.

Even then, memory loss is far preferable to death.

You said I was supposed to regain my memories. Was there a change of plans?

“Yes. That’s why I asked you to come here. The gods aren’t quite omnipotent, but I wasn’t expecting their plans to change so extensively. I don’t know if I should compliment you or lament that you’ve surpassed them in some way.”

Fenrir sighed before explaining the anomaly that was happening to me.

“The original plan was to have Cherubim support you until you got used to living as a sword. Once you adapted, I was to reveal myself to you and you would regain a portion of your memories. I would then slowly incorporate myself into you and the sword.

But Cherubim...P.A., she’s...

“Yes. She overextended herself fighting the Lich and is heavily damaged from that.”

P.A. had saved us when all seemed lost. The Cherubim system allowed us to emerge victorious, but we’d lost P.A. as a result. Since then, I hadn’t been able to talk to her.

“Of course, we would’ve been annihilated if she hadn’t intervened. I am grateful to her, but the plan started coming apart after we lost Cherubim’s support system.”

And that wasn’t the only spanner in the works. Fenrir started counting on his fingers.

“Your prodigious rate of growth. The insane battles you keep finding yourself in. Your copious number of Skills. Your system overload after using Unleash Potential. Your loss of control from Mad Ogre Form. Your assimilation of Fanatix.”

When he put it that way, the last couple of months had been pretty busy.

That seemed...not great.

I'd lost P.A. after using Unleash Potential, creating a huge void in my system. Mad Ogre Form made Fenrir's evil side go berserk. And Fanatix's remnants placed so much stress on my system that the seal on my memories and the Evil One was coming apart.

"This is all proof of how hard you and Fran have been fighting. I won't say it's a bad thing. But the gods have had to make extreme adjustments to accommodate you."

The gods experienced time differently and were more lenient because of it. But even by their standards, we were probably running in the fast lane. They didn't think the seals on my memory and the Evil One were foolproof, which was why the gods had left the vestiges of Cherubim behind. She'd be able to fix the seals if they ever started coming apart.

But that repair ability was drastically reduced after P.A. lost her powers. The many dangerous encounters we'd had in a short period of time had only weakened the seal further.

"But Aristeia fixed it," Fran said.

"She did, and she did a decent job of it, too. But even a Godsmith couldn't completely understand the workings of a divine mechanism. It was first aid at best."

And this is different?

"I don't know the exact details, but it's supposed to be."

The pedestal I was lodged inside was made by the gods, and it had powers Fenrir didn't even know.

"In any case, you've grown far stronger before fully adapting to being a sword. Left unchecked, the seal on your memories will break, which would leave a lasting mark on your mind—would drive you insane, as a matter of fact." Fenrir said. "And that's not all. You've been hearing voices lately, right?"

Voices?

I didn't think he meant his own voice. There was only one other alternative.

You mean the voice telling me to devour everything?

The horrific screaming I heard right after I absorbed Fanatix in the capital. The voice which told me to ‘devour’ over and over. I’d yelled at it for being too loud—I was in the middle of a battle, after all. It disappeared after that.

“The very one. I’m guessing you know who that voice belongs to now.”

The Evil One...

“Correct. The pieces of the Evil One fused to my soul, to be precise. But still...” Fenrir chuckled.

What’s so funny?

“I’m just remembering the look on the bastard’s face when you yelled at him,” he sniggered. “He couldn’t believe that there was a creature he couldn’t control. He was so shocked that he backed off.”

So that’s what happened. I didn’t ward the pieces of the Evil One away with my force of will—they were just so shocked that they left me alone.

“There are still traces of the Evil One within in you, and we can’t leave that alone. I had you come here so you could have your memory seal reinforced and all your systems repaired.”

“So Teacher can get better now?”

“Without a doubt. I’ll be in a world of trouble if he doesn’t. I *am* part of him, after all.”

For all the troubling things that Fenrir had told us, things were going to work out somehow. That meant I would still get to be with Fran.

So what should I do?

“Nothing.”

Nothing...? Just...don’t move?

“That’s right. The pedestal will repair you by itself. Your job is to stay perfectly still. The spells built into the pedestal should already be diagnosing you.”

Roger that. Don’t move. Just...don’t move. I’m actually a little scared of this now...

I recalled the mind-splitting pain I experienced when Aristeia was fixing me. Was that going to happen again?

So how long is this going to take?

“That I don’t know. It might take an hour, a day, a week.”

Wait, so I might be stuck here for a while?

“Think of all the complex systems running in your blade. You might be here for over a month, for all I know.”

Seriously? What about Fran?

She would have to fight through the Demon Wolf’s Garden to return to Alessa. It was too dangerous even with Jet around.

And what about Skill Sharing?

“Skill Sharing should still work,” Fenrir said. “As long as you remain here.”

“Don’t worry,” Fran said. “I’m not going anywhere.”

That’s pretty much our only option. I’m so sorry about all this, Fran.

“It’s okay. I can get some training done now.”

But you won’t be able to use me.

“Then I’ll train myself so I can fight without you. Jet’s still here, too.”

“Woof!”

Yeah, you’re right.

Fran’s combat capability wasn’t drastically reduced, since she could still use her Skills. As long as she stayed away from the outer rims, she’d probably be fine. Besides, Fenrir said that monsters kept a wide berth from the pedestal.

“Now then, shall I train you and Jet?” asked Fenrir.

“You?”

“Yeah. The pedestal’s powers allow me to materialize, but I’ll be going back to sleep once Teacher is fully repaired. This is the only time I’ll be able to train you.”

I think it's a good idea, Fran.

I was interested to see how Fenrir would train them. I was *especially* interested in how he would train Jet. I finally understood why I had a wolf as a familiar—it was Fenrir's doing. He was the reason Jet had the title 'Vassal of the Godwolf.' The Godwolf himself would have a lot to teach our direwolf.

Fran gave it some thought and bowed her head to Fenrir.

"Okay. I'm in your care."

"Bark!"

"Excellent. We'll begin with a short lecture."

I watched as Fenrir commenced their training, but it was a little different from what I imagined. "Good. Don't move."

"Hrm."

"Woof."

"Focus your energy inside you. Sharpen your consciousness."

He didn't start with a class on how to make better use of their weapons and Skills. Instead, he worked on their inner workings. Fran sat cross-legged in a meditative state, working on the flow of her mana. She could already use a ton of flashy moves, but she was missing some of the basics because she had been self-taught. This basic training was the perfect remedy for that.

"You'll be able to use your Skills better if you perfect this."

Fenrir kept a close eye on Fran from inside of me. It allowed him to spot her weaknesses.

"You have two problems, Fran. First is your Skill control."

I can't say it's perfect.

"Hm..."

My Skills were compounded into Advanced Skills after Aristeia performed maintenance on me. They were stronger, but also harder to control. Fran gave a pained nod, admitting this weakness.

“Also, your strength is so great that it ends up recoiling against your own body.”

Yeah...I really wish we could do something about that.

The best I could think of was training her body and increasing her stats. Using less powerful Skills and reducing our output would solve that, but it wasn't feasible if we were up against a powerful enemy.

“This exercise will help with that weakness.”

Huh? Really?

“Yes.”

If her Skill control got better, Fran would be able to use her excess mana to control the recoil. At the same time, her defense would get better.

“The effects won't be quite on the same level as physical training, but she will see improvements.”

Sounds good. It was a simple but effective method of training.

“Now Jet, your main advantage is your utilization of Skills.”

His Skill variety is his main selling point.

“That it is. Dark direwolves don't see a huge increase in combat ability when they evolve further.”

What?

“W-woof?”

Jet was also surprised to hear what Fenrir said about evolution. You could read it plain on his face. “Wait, seriously?”

“A Darkness Wolf can further evolve into either a Gehenna Wolf or a Darknight Wolf. They are both Lord-class monsters. As such, they have more Control Skills to use on other wolf class monsters. However, their own abilities won't increase as much.”

So they let their minions do the fighting, like a Goblin King?

“Indeed. They will have more spells at their disposal, but their stats will not

see an explosive increase like other wolf types.”

The alpha of a wolfpack would have a different set of skills from a lone wolf.

“Ruff...” Jet hung his head in response. He’d really wanted to have a super strong evolution.

“But that’s why training is so important for you, Jet,” Fenrir said. “You need to improve your Skills to get stronger as a lone wolf. You have to think of more ways to use them.”

“Woof!”

“Let’s do our best, Jet.”

Good luck, you two.

Three days had gone by since Fran and Jet started meditating. They took breaks, of course, but their waking hours were otherwise spent in the meditative stance. Jet just looked like he was heeling.

I should’ve cooked some food before we got here.

“Fran is able to hunt and cook for herself, isn’t she? She has the Skills to do so.”

Yeah, but then she can’t focus on her training.

“Point.”

But today Fran and Jet were starting a different exercise: stalking the goblins in the area without using a single Skill. The goal of this exercise wasn’t to completely eliminate their reliance on stealth Skills, but to increase their latent stealth capacity, allowing them to get even stealthier when they added Skills to the mix.

I was very thankful for this—it wasn’t anything I could teach them, after all. When you’re an inanimate object, it’s hard to figure out what it’s like to conceal your presence. I didn’t have any presence to *begin* with. I lacked a pulse, breath, and didn’t have the scent associated with living things. My motion was powered by telekinesis, making it perfectly silent.

I didn't even have what you'd ordinarily call an aura. All I needed to do was conceal my mana and monsters couldn't detect me. I remembered the sensations of being human, but I hadn't exactly gone out and trained in how to conceal myself back on Earth.

So now Fran and Jet had meditation in the morning followed by goblin stalking in the afternoon. Not exactly the most glamorous of training programs. Personally, I didn't see how this would affect their damage output.

Will Fran really get stronger like this?

"Yes. The effects would be greater if she leveled up, of course."

But wouldn't she need me for that?

"She has other swords in her inventory, does she not? The outer rim monsters might be difficult without you, but Fran should easily be able to take on D-Threats."

I guess...

"I know how you feel, but you need to take a step back sometimes."

Urgh... Fenrir had a point. And it wasn't as if I could do anything other than watch at this point. I was just worried that something would happen when she wasn't under my watch.

How's the progress on my repair going?

"Who knows? You're still being diagnosed, as far as I can tell. The repair process budged an inch."

Even after three days?

"Yeah. Repairs should take longer than diagnosis, too."

Meaning if the diagnosis ends today, we're looking at another three days at least. According to Fenrir, my underlying systems were so complex that a full analysis was going to take a lot of time. *And you can't tell the rate of progress?*

"No."

Ugh... Not being able to see the end of this process was its own sort of agony.

"Sorry. But this is for your own sake. You'll have to be patient."

I know. By the way, I know I can't move right now, but can I still use my Skills and spells?

"Well, I think you should limit yourself to telepathy and basic magic. The more strain you put on yourself the longer the diagnosis will take."

I'll...be still, I guess.

"Good."

Please just let this end!

A week had passed since I had been inserted into the pedestal. Diagnosis was still ongoing.

At this rate, I had to wonder if it'd really take a whole month to finish.

I was doing okay as long as Fran was around, but I had absolutely nothing to do when she was out goblin-stalking. Speaking of which, Fran and Jet had taken a liking to that exercise. They look forward to it every day, taking to it with the spirit of a private eye.

"We'll get close to Bent Nose without getting noticed today."

"Woof!"

"And we can ignore Broken Horn."

"Arf?"

"He keeps playing with Swordsman and never comes back to the nest."

Fran had taken to identifying and naming the goblins they were stalking, and she looked like she was having a ball with it. They were going to stalk a goblin's movements for the whole day in order to locate its nest, something they could do until they got bored.

Fran and Jet would be away until it was dark out, leaving me alone with my imagination. In my boredom, I ended up finishing a light novel in my head.

'Middle-Aged Sage Was An SSSS-Rank Heroic Adventurer In His Past Life And Reincarnates Into A Holy Blade Wielded By An Evil Lady In Order To Become A Demon Lord.' Catchy title, I know.

This super high fantasy piece had plenty of laughs and plenty of tears. It had the schadenfreude of seeing an engagement be destroyed as well as the hedonistic pleasures of the harem genre. The story ends as our hero, with his harem of a hundred wives, is about to take vengeance upon his old party that left him. Then, everything turns out to be a dream. The protagonist awakes in his bed on Earth with the realization of the pointlessness of war and tearfully comes to the conclusion, "An ordinary life is the best life!" A cop-out? Maybe. But touching all the same.

Honestly, I thought it was pretty good. Good enough to top the charts of a light novel website if I were to upload it back on Earth. Maybe I had a knack for this writing thing.

"What are you up to, Teacher?"

I was so bored I started writing a shitty fantasy novel in my head. Worst yet, I finished the thing...and now I'm bored again.

"Perhaps you should do some exercises of your own," Fenrir mused.

But I already am. I was already doing Fran's mana control exercise. But thanks to the Skill Multi Mind, I could train and think about other stuff at the same time. I couldn't help it!

"Not to mention your grace from the God of Wisdom."

What?

"That blessing helps you cast multiple spells at the same time. It makes it easier for you to maintain multiple trains of thought."

The effect was multiplied when coupled with Multi Mind. Unfortunately, it *also* multiplied my own boredom. *Actually, why do I even have Wisdom God's Grace?*

"Because Cherubim was created to be a vassal of the God of Wisdom. That's what the being you call P.A. is."

The bond I had with P.A. was strengthened after Aristeia's maintenance, making me a vassal of the God of Wisdom, as well.

You know, I was thinking about the emblem on my hilt. Why is it a wolf? I

know it's supposed to represent you, but I thought I was made from Cherubim. And a Cherubim is an angel, as far as I know.

“There are a few reasons. First is to conceal the fact that you were made from Cherubim. Even if most people are never going to see you, there are those who know what Cherubim look like, not to mention the Skill Oracle of the Gods.”

A former Godsword was still a Godsword, and people *want* those things. Hiding it was the right choice.

“The other reason is that it's simply more powerful that way.”

What? But it's just a change of shape. Was my strength really affected by the change of my emblem shape?

“Form and being are intertwined. Cherubim has a form befitting Cherubim, and you—with me residing within you—have a form that fits for you.”

And my strength changes because of that?

“Slightly. Godswords are highly advanced weapons, after all. Changing a Godsword's emblem won't alter its powers much.”

But a Godsword being slightly more powerful was significant given how strong Godswords already were.

“Well,” Fenrir mused further. “It also affects what blessings you can get. A weapon with the shape of a flame cannot receive the blessing of the Water God. That's how important form is to function.”

All right, but I still have Wisdom God's Grace. Given my wolf emblem, I thought I'd get a blessing related to you or the Goddess of the Silver Moon.

“I'm going to sound like I'm contradicting myself, but form isn't everything. It is but one factor making up a much larger, more intricate pattern.”

So what's on the inside and outside both matter.

“Correct.”

I was going to get Wisdom God's Grace as I grew stronger, but I needed it immediately after P.A. lost her powers. Fortunately, I should be back on track soon after Aristeia fixed me up.

“As for the blessing of the Goddess of Chaos,” Fenrir said. “I...don’t know. She’s always been capricious. I wouldn’t be surprised if she blessed you because she thought it would be funny.”

The Goddess of Chaos seemed like a...well, a *chaotic* person when I met her, just as you’d expect. That was the main impression I got of her when I talked to her in the dungeons of Ulmutt, anyway. “Have a blessed chaos,” she’d said.

After everything you said about vassals, it sounds like kind of a pain in the ass.

Fenrir sighed. “This is the problem with you otherworlders. The people in this world would kill to have the graces of two gods bestowed upon them. Besides, the gods aren’t even controlling you. They’re not telling you what to do. Just think of them as useful Skills you have at your disposal.”

I’m pretty sure the Goddess of Chaos gave me orders when we last met.

“But they weren’t the orders given to vassals. She was just intimidating you with her powers.”

And you don’t think that makes her worse?

“Who knows? You’re free to rebel if you’re ready to die.”

But I don’t wanna die.

Conclusion: Don’t rebel against the gods. Unless it’s the Evil One, of course. But what if we ended up fighting one of them? I didn’t think it was possible, but still...

I’m in a funk because I have nothing to do. My mind just thinks of the worst possible outcomes when I think too much, see? I was usually optimistic, but overthinking makes everyone a pessimist.

Fenrir sighed again. “In that case, I’ll show you something more complex to work on.”

Shoot.

“Change the shape of your basic spells by manipulating its mana. This is basic mage training.”

Change the shape? So I can make my arrow spells thicker?

“Even better. You’ll be able to do stuff like this.” Fenrir produced a fire arrow right in front of his eyes and its shape quickly changed to that of a wolf. It even mimicked a howling motion. “Did you get that? I didn’t use any additional mana there.”

Right. I usually modified my spells by putting more mana into the cast. It allowed me to increase the spell’s power and change its shape, but I still needed to spend mana. I couldn’t just do it the way Fenrir did. What he did cost the same mana as a regular fire arrow. I’d need to train my mana control and imagination to do the same thing.

Beginner mages trained in such a way to make the best out of their limited mana pool. They’d cast their spells but change their shape in order to train their focus, control, and endurance. My magic was all self-taught, so I really appreciated Fenrir filling in this huge gap in my fundamentals. At this rate, my spells would become more powerful without any extra leveling.

“You won’t spend that much mana, which means that it won’t have much of an effect on your diagnosis. You’ll be able to make more interesting spells, the more focused you are. You’ll be training and entertaining yourself at the same time.”

That does sound fun.

I conjured up a fire arrow and tried to make it into a wolf like Fenrir did.

I guess a wolf is asking too much from my first try.

“Start with basic shapes.”

Damn it. Just you wait. I’ll make a full-blown cerberus eventually!

“Looking forward to it.”

How long has it been?

“...”

No answer. Of course not.

I had lost all sense of time ever since I was put into this pedestal.

Clouds drifted, rain fell, days and nights passed over me. And yet I remained.

Eons...how long is that? When will I ever get out of here?

“...”

When will I leave this prison of a garden...?

A voice answered my lamentation. The deep voice of a man with a commanding tone.

“Are you quite done?”

Fenrir looked exasperated as I played out my ‘I’ve been here for a million years’ fantasy.

I’m bored!

“I didn’t think it was going to take this long. At least it’s better than that time you were stuck in the Withering Forest.”

I won’t fight you on that one...

At least *here* I knew there was going to be an end to this. Fran, Jet, and Fenrir were hanging around, too, and I was getting stronger from all my training.

But I can’t help myself! It’s been a month!

One whole month! And the pedestal was *still* diagnosing me. How long was this going to take? There was a small hut made of land magic next to the pedestal now. Fran had roughed it out on the field for the first few days; she never minded that sort of thing. In fact, she preferred the wide-open space of the plains compared to a cooped-up room.

Eventually it rained, though, and a modest hut became necessary. Fenrir offered to make it—but he ended up digging a huge hole and saying, “Perfect for a good night’s sleep!”

Oh, right. He *was* a giant wolf and all.

In the end, Fran had to make the hut herself. Being Fran, it wasn’t a very well-made hut. All she wanted was a roof over her head, and that was basically all she made. I would’ve made her a castle if I wasn’t bound to using basic spells!

Still, Fran and Jet’s training went smoothly, partly due to my ongoing

restoration process and partly thanks to Fenrir being able to show himself to them.

Let me show you what I can do with frost magic now.

I'd never been good with frost magic. Now, though, I conjured up a basic spell and turned it into a wolf, and then into a dragon, and then into a tiger. As for my specialties—thunder and fire magic—I could conjure up a ten-headed dragon, each head possessing its own fine articulation, and end the trick with a fireworks display.

I could also make a pretty lady do a sexy pose, though this wasn't something I could ever show Fran.

"You could just turn off Multi Mind, you know," Fenrir said. "You're more sensitive to the passage of time because of how fast your thoughts are going."

But what if I need to respond to something immediately?

I kept my detection abilities on so that I could notice if Fran was in trouble when she was out training. This made Multi Mind necessary since it allowed me to control multiple trains of thought.

"You're such a worrywart."

Besides, it makes for good practice. I can't just fool around while Fran and Jet are out there training.

Fran was now in the second phase of her training. She'd fight using only Sword Arts, which she wasn't used to. The recovery time after a Sword Art made it far too risky to use in a high-speed battle. With all the Skills and spells she used to enhance her single strikes, she never really had much of a need for them. But there was another reason why Fran wasn't very good at using Sword Arts.

An ordinary swordsman progressed in this manner: Train Sword Mastery → Acquire Sword Arts → Use mainly Sword Arts in battle → Fight an opponent that they can't beat using only Sword Arts → Even out both Sword Mastery and Sword Arts in training.

But Fran was immediately blessed with high-level Sword Mastery from the

get-go, which made it her go-to Skill in combat. She skipped the stage of spamming Sword Arts and watching them fail in combat. By this point, the ordinary swordsman would have the timing and feel of various Sword Arts ingrained in muscle memory. Without this experience, Fran had trouble mixing Sword Arts into her offense and defense.

We mainly used Sword Arts to get the drop on an opponent or deal the finishing blow. Hence, Fenrir told her to fight using *only* Sword Arts. They even sparred with this method. He was a phantom, so getting hit wasn't a problem for him. He gave her advice every time she did.

"I would like her to try it in a real battle."

Can't she just keep sparring with you?

"I can't fight back because I'm a phantom. I don't even make for a proper sparring partner, really. Then again, the goblins in the surrounding area don't pose much of a challenge, either. She needs something stronger. Either she finds a proper monster to fight or spars with an adventurer."

A new technique could only be learned through repetition in actual combat.

"And I'm also running out of time."

Huh? What do you mean?

"I'm trying to save as much energy as I can outside of training, but I can't keep materializing myself for long. I won't be able to keep talking to you, either. Sorry about that."

Not only would Fenrir disappear from our sight, he would also return to his dormant state.

"I've taught Fran everything I can, and it's going to be vexing not being able to see how she's doing. You'll have to take care of the rest, Teacher."

Can she just hunt weak monsters?

"If she can't find an ideal sparring partner, she'll have no choice. She'll start small and work her way up. Fortunately, the Garden offers a selection of monsters to fight."

I was still worried about letting her fight monsters without me. The last time

we were separated was at the capital, but this time / would be the one left waiting.

Can't Fran and Jet just fight each other?

"Those two know each other's tricks too well. You'll need another adventurer or a powerful monster."

Another adventurer was out of the question; we'd have to hide my existence *and* they would have to stay here for as long as Fran needed training. I doubted we could find any takers. Monsters were our only option, but the thought of having her fight without me was too distressing. I was probably more worried about them than they were about themselves.

Urgh...

"You really need to worry less, Teacher."

I know that... But I couldn't help myself, you know?!

Fran and Jet returned as Fenrir had a good chuckle about my neurosis.

"We're back."

"Woof!"

Hey, how'd it go?

"Hm. We've almost broken through Bent Nose."

"Woof!"

They were still enjoying their game of goblin-stalking. As she talked about her exciting battle with the goblin, Fran suddenly held her stomach.

"I'm hungry," she said. They both looked downcast and their stomachs growled, dying for more calories. They trained so hard that they'd gotten hungry—the ideal healthy lifestyle.

Fran and Jet cleaned themselves up with magic and I got to preparing their meal. Sure it was just taking some dishes out of Pocket Dimension, but I had to make sure to rotate them so they wouldn't get bored.

Let's have curry topped with fish fry today.

“Hm! Fish is good, too.”

“Woof!”

Enjoy your meal.

“Let’s eat!”

“Bark, bark!”

“The worst thing about this body is the fact that I can’t eat,” Fenrir sighed as he watched Fran and Jet stuffed their faces with curry. I knew where he was coming from, and these two did have a way of making food look delicious. I was jealous myself, despite no longer having an appetite. Fenrir’s appetite had also disappeared with his phantom body.

“Huh...?”

“Woof.”

Fran was washing down the unbelievable feast with some tea...but suddenly both of them stopped what they were doing and stared north.

Something’s coming.

“In a straight line,” Fran said. Whatever it was had a lot of mana, and it was coming in hot. I thought it was just another monster in a rampage, but it was ignoring all of the areas, making a beeline for the center. This was no ordinary monster.

Get ready, you two!

“Hm!”

“Grr!”

Fran and Jet got up to anticipate the threat. Fenrir disappeared just in case. I would probably need to stop my diagnosis, too. I didn’t know whether I could actually do that, but Fran’s safety came first.

“Hm?”

“Arf?”

But our anxiety soon melted away. The mana signature hadn’t disappeared,

but it belonged to someone we knew. As it got closer, we knew exactly who it was.

“Amanda?”

“Woof.”

Amanda, A Rank adventurer, was approaching us at Mach speed—just really going for it.

Five minutes passed and there she was, within sight. When we got a visual on her, she got a visual on us.

“Fraaaaaaan!” Amanda smiled, hands waving frantically. She picked up speed when she saw Fran, and her wind spell ripped right through a goblin that was standing between them. Both Fran and Jet let out an anguished cry when they saw it happen.

“Bent Nose, nooooo!”

“Arooooo!”

The goblin was Bent Nose, Fran and Jet’s eternal rival. It had an outstanding sense of smell for a goblin, which allowed it to smell them as they were stalking it. They’d done their best to be stealthy so they could observe it from afar.

“Bent Nose...”

“Huh? What?” Amanda was confused when she saw Fran’s reaction.

“Amanda, you dummy.”

“Huh? What’d I do...?”

Amanda was expecting a heartfelt reunion after not seeing Fran for a long time. But Fran was on her knees, crying about gods knew what. She was mad at Amanda, too.



“I’m...sorry?” Amanda said. She didn’t know what she did but she bowed her head and apologized. “I’m really sorry.”

“Fine...”

“Oh, thank you, Fran!”

“Mrgh.”

Amanda jumped towards Fran and hugged her tight. Fran made a strange noise within her chest, but was then decisively assailed with cheek rubs and kisses. This was their first meeting in a while and I knew that Amanda could get passionate...but if she was a dude, I’d ignore my diagnosis and give her a good wallop.

“You’ll be okay now, Fran!” Amanda said. “Your big sister’s here to protect you!”

Fran tilted her head in confusion. “What?”

“You haven’t come back from the Demon Wolf’s Garden in weeks! We thought you ran into some trouble.”

“I didn’t.” Looks like Fran had been away for long enough to be treated as a missing person. “But didn’t I tell everyone I’d be out training?”

“Yeah, but we didn’t think you’d stay here the whole time.”

Normally, adventurers who trained in a nearby haunt returned to the city every few days to resupply food and sell gathered materials. But Fran had bypassed this problem with Pocket Dimension. She could take the extended trips to dungeons and haunts that ordinary adventurers couldn’t.

“I came to check on you because Nell was so worried about you.”

“But she knows I have Pocket Dimension.”

“You should be more aware about how crazy you can get sometimes,” Amanda sighed and poked Fran’s nose. Fran must have been a special kind of crazy if even this A Rank was saying it... “Storage spells aren’t usually this powerful.”

She’s not wrong. There were Timespace spells which allowed you to store

items, but they weren't as convenient as ours were. I even had a spell called Storage which I had yet to use because Pocket Dimension was just that much better. Instant access, large opening, near boundless storage space, and time stood still inside of it: it was a very specialized Skill.

In comparison, basic storage items and spells didn't have as much inventory space, even if they could store large items like ours could. They also took more time if you weren't used to them. All in all, I was lucky that I'd acquired Pocket Dimension so early in my adventure.

"And this is an A-Threat haunt, remember? As strong as you are, everyone got worried after you disappeared for a month. Even if the Guildmaster just laughed it off."

So Amanda had rushed to the Demon Wolf's Garden, thinking something had happened to Fran.

"And Teacher's missing so I was expecting the worst..." Amanda continued. "What happened to him? I can't sense his mana." She looked right through me with pained eyes.

Apparently, I was undetectable to outsiders as long as I was in the pedestal. As far as she could tell, I was a depowered magic sword. Amanda looked uncomfortable when she asked Fran about me, and it was a difficult question if you knew about us. It would be like asking why your partner was dead.

Fortunately, I had already talked to Fenrir about how much Amanda could know.

I appreciate your concern, Amanda, but please don't junk me so easily.

"Huh? Teacher? You're okay? I thought for sure you were..."

Apparently, this pedestal keeps my mana from leaking out as long as I'm inside it. It was made by a Godsmith, you see.

"Wow, well that explains it. But a Godsmith? Are you a Godsword?"

Ha ha ha. No, no. I'm a regular sword that just so happens to be made by a Godsmith, that's all.

"Uh-huh. You're not lying, but I get the feeling like you're not telling me the

whole story.”

I, uh...I don't know what you're talking about.

“Wow, how'd you figure that out, Amanda?”

Fran!

“Huh?”

Amanda giggled. “Don't worry. I have some secrets of my own, you know. I imagine you must have a lot more secrets than I do, being an Intelligent Weapon.”

She didn't seem mad, which was good. Her intuition was amazing.

“I had a feeling that these ruins had something to do with you. Don't worry. I won't tell anybody.”

Thanks.

“But you know, I never knew this place was related to Godsmiths. The ruins have always been a mystery.”

“Hm. Teacher is being fixed up here.”

This pedestal comes with a variety of features.

“Fixed up? Did something happen?”

Fenrir opined that I shouldn't tell Amanda about him or the gods. The most she could know was about the Godsmith Elmera and how maintenance was being conducted on me.

“There was a huge fight in the capital,” Fran began. After listening to her long story, Amanda pulled her into her arms again and started patting her head at high speed.

“You fought so hard!” she cried.

Fran had a habit of being dragged into life-threatening combat wherever she went, after all. But Amanda was still patting Fran's head so fast I thought she might set fire to it and leave her bald.

“You did a great job exposing that cheapskate marquis' plot, but don't go too

crazy, all right?”

“Cheapskate marquis?”

“Aschtner! I accepted some quests for him and he’d always skimp out on the pay! I didn’t have much of a choice after an acquaintance introduced me to him.”

Amanda had taken a number of provision quests for the marquis in the past. As a person of influence in Alessa, she was in no position to refuse. She had a lot of connections with the government and nobility, so this was probably a regular occurrence for her.

But her position also gave her access to the details of the story. Amanda was going up against Raydoss, after all, and she also could use her personal pipelines to do information gathering of her own. Basically, she knew what Fran had gone through in the capital.

But it was Amanda’s first time hearing about what happened in the Beastman Nation. Her face darkened with sorrow when she heard about Kiara’s death. It wasn’t so much grief over Kiara’s death, but out of sympathy for Fran’s loss.

“You really are a fighter, Fran,” she said quietly. “But don’t push yourself too hard, all right?”

“Hm?”

“I’d be very sad if something happened to you out there. Take it easy once in a while, okay?”

Amanda’s tone was playful, but she looked at Fran with earnest eyes. Fran could only nod apologetically.

“Hm...but I can’t get stronger if I don’t push myself.”

“Right,” Amanda sighed and turned away. She knew that she wasn’t going to change Fran’s resolve.

“By the way...”

“Hm?”

“You’re training while waiting for Teacher to get fixed up, right?”

“Hm.”

That’s the plan.

“I see. All right then, I’ll help you out!” Amanda clenched her fists with a look of determination. She looked motivated enough to start sparring in an instant.

And how do you plan on doing that?

Amanda should’ve been in Alessa to anticipate the Raydossian invasion. She shouldn’t be able to do anything this reckless as long as the skirmishes were still ongoing.

“You need a training partner, don’t you? I volunteer.”

“Oooh.”

Fran was happy, but could Amanda really afford to do this?

We appreciate it and all, but what about Alessa? Aren’t you about to go to war with Raydoss?

“Oh, that.” Amanda then filled me in on the current situation. Alessan forces had succeeded in repelling the Raydossian army, causing them to retreat. Raydoss then issued a statement that a group of radicals had initiated the invasion and apologized on their behalf. *“We’re very sorry for our little rascals, but you know how they can be.”* Something like that. But afterwards, Raydoss had *also* sent a messenger to deliver the head of the radical ringleader.

“The head belongs to an unrelated low-rank noble who lost a dispute between the nobility, of course.”

A scapegoat. The leaders of Alessa and negotiators sent from Granzell knew this, to be sure. But they had no choice other than to accept Raydoss’ excuse.

“Why? They started it,” said Fran.

“I know,” Amanda whined. “But prolonging the war doesn’t do us any good, either.”

Especially not when the capital of the nation was in shambles. Granzell wanted to focus its efforts on rebuilding the city. There was the matter of saving face, but that was resolved after Raydoss apologized. They could extract

restitution payments from them, too.

Raydoss had probably taken all of this into account. Even if they failed, they knew that Granzell would not launch a counterinvasion, not after what happened. They'd need to pay restitution, but they got precious combat data in return.

"Jean is keeping guard at the border while the other adventurers are sniffing out Raydossian spies at home."

"And you?"

"I'm taking on high level and urgent quests to make up for the other adventurers. But I worked a little too hard and ended up finishing them all."

Then why not join the spy hunt? I wondered.

Well, because Amanda was too well-known to be a viable option.

"How rude of them, really. I can be sneaky when I need to be. Nell and Klimt made it sound like I'm some muscle-brained lunatic who's only good for fighting," she complained. But she quickly regained her composure. "It all worked out, though. It gave me a chance to come here. I should be thanking them, really!"

Amanda wouldn't be staying here. She would return to Alessa and visit us once every few days.

"You can't just spar with me the whole time, right? You need a balanced training program. Sparring, hunting, basic training, exploring the field with me. I think it's a solid plan."

This is a good opportunity, Teacher. You should accept her offer.

Fenrir agreed to Amanda's suggestion without revealing himself to her.

Well, if you'll have us.

"Hm. Thanks Amanda."

Fran and I nodded. Amanda then started preparing her whip. Despite her cheerful humming, she was stretching her weapon in her hands.

Uhhh, we're doing it now?

“Of course!”

“Hm. Naturally.”

And here I thought I understood the inner workings of blood knights, but nope. These two weren’t about to do anything as ordinary as take a short break.

Soon, Fran and Amanda were prepared for battle.

“Shall we hop to it?”

“Hm!”

They stood in front of the pedestal, watching each other with sharp eyes. You wouldn’t believe they’d had a tearful reunion only a few minutes ago...

Fran was equipped with the Enchanted Phantom Augite Blade. Meanwhile, Amanda brandished an ominous-looking whip with the equally terrifying name Devil’s Torture. The whip was red and thorny, and shining with the gleam of enamel. It was a different whip from the Sky Dragon’s Beard she broke at the tournament and the replacement she used in the finals.

Name: Devil’s Torture

Attack: 721, MP: 616, Durability: 720

Mana Conductivity: B—

Skills: Telescopic, Amplify Pain, Paralyze

Name: Sky Dragon’s Beard

Attack: 1030, MP: 1800, Durability: 1000

Mana Conductivity: A

Skills: Weight Change, Telescopic

Weaker than Sky Dragon’s Beard but still formidable. Amplify Pain sounded like a despicable Skill to deal with.

“I’m testing this new whip while I’m at it. Hope you don’t mind.”

“Hm. Sounds good.”

Amanda chuckled. “Good. Here we go.”

And the battle began. To an outsider, the start of the match might have seemed sudden and abrupt, but not to these two. A match started as soon as both combatants readied their weapons.

“Tsch!”

“Hrm!”

“Haaa!”

“Hm!” Fran slashed at Amanda while dodging her lashes. The exchange lasted for a few minutes before Amanda smiled.

She looked impressed. “You’ve changed your approach.”

“Hm.”

“You’re consciously using more Sword Arts, I see. I get it.”

Amanda saw what Fran was doing right away. Watching her fight, I noticed that she naturally blended Whip Arts into her Whip Mastery.

“Tsh! Haa!” Her whip danced about the battlefield. It dug into the ground and attacked Fran from beneath before ending in a horizontal strike. This move was a Whip Art called Twisted Water Lily, and Amanda used it to lock down both horizontal and vertical movements of her opponent. Now Fran had to worry about dodging the attacks she could see *and* anticipate the underground attacks she *couldn’t* see. And this was just one of Amanda’s many Whip Arts.

There was Snake Sting, a move which instantly resumed her offense once deflected. And Mizuchi Strike, an art which made the whip move like a living thing despite Amanda not moving a muscle. All of which highlighted the importance of utilizing one’s weapon arts.

So that’s the goal...

In the end, Fran’s sword was flung out of her hands under the pressure of the storm of lashes. Amanda was very strong.

“Urgh...”

“You’re not beating me just yet. But I think you’ll be a lot stronger with this new approach of yours. You might actually surpass me once you get the hang of using your weapon arts.”

“Hm!”

“And fighting without Teacher will definitely be a boon for you. Attack power and magic aside, it forces you to make your own decisions in battle.”

“Okay...” Fran nodded, though she seemed frustrated. Her ability to take advice was what let her grow. Even if she was stubborn about other stuff, she was always willing to listen to combat advice.

“Right, then. Round two!”

“Hm!”

A single round wouldn’t be enough for these two. Fran and Amanda sparred with each other until the sun went down.

“I haven’t sparred like that in a while!”

“Hm...” Fran hadn’t won a single round. She managed to maintain her new approach of using mainly sword arts, but she was still frustrated. She probably thought she’d at least take a round from Amanda.

But the difference in power between the two was too stark, especially without me. It wasn’t just raw power, either. Amanda had years of experience and technique honed into her very bones.

Still, Fran managed to react to most of Amanda’s whip attacks in the second half. She just needed to keep it up and she would make a lot of progress.

Amanda smiled and complimented Fran as she wiped off her sweat. Like a big sister, she was happy at the progress Fran was making. And of course, she was reluctant to leave after the training was over.

“I’ll be going back to Alessa now. I’ll be back in four days.”

“Okay.”

“Will you be all right without me, Fran?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you sure? You’re not lying about being lonely, are you?”

“Hm.”

“Are you *sure*?”

“I’m *sure*.”

“Are you really really really—”

Get going, Amanda!

Dinner time.

Fran and Jet were sinking their teeth into a gigantic piece of meat.

Fran didn’t just eat curry all the time, see? Sure, she had curry for breakfast and lunch, but that’s beside the point.

A fanged boar had wandered into our camp earlier, so we roasted it and had it for dinner.

“This is pretty good,” Fran munched.

“Bow wow! Woof!”

Fran held a cartoonish cut of meat by the bones on its ends. Meanwhile, Jet was biting into the bone along with the meat. He loved the flavor of the thigh meat, as well as the texture of the bone.

“Well,” Fenrir said. “It’s time for me to go back to sleep.”

“Hm...”

“Woof...”

Fenrir had told them that he’d be going dormant again soon, but they were still sad to see him go. Unlike Amanda, they didn’t know when they could see him again.

“Don’t look so down,” said Fenrir. “I’m just going back to sleeping inside of Teacher. Good luck on your training, you two.”

“Thank you for everything.”

“Woof.”

Fran left her food on the table, got up, and bowed deeply to Fenrir. She could be serious when the situation called for it. Amanda was a sisterly figure who she was friendly with. Meanwhile, Fenrir was like her favorite teacher who only got to tutor her for a limited time.

“No need to be so formal with me, Fran. Teacher and I share the same body and soul.”

“But you’ve taught me so much.”

“Woof.”

“I just hope you’ll continue to work hard. I can’t get my powers back otherwise.”

“Hm! You got it!”

Fenrir smiled at her determination. “It sounds like I’m in good hands. Catch you later.”

“Hm. See you soon.”

“Woof!”

Fenrir placed his ghostly hands atop the heads of Fran and Jet. He couldn’t touch them of course, but the two seemed happy to receive the gesture. He smiled at them for a while before fading away. I knew that he had gone back to sleep inside me.

Good night, Fenrir. We’ll see him again someday.

“Hm! I’ll keep working hard until then.”

“Woof.”

A few days passed since Fenrir had returned inside me.

Today, Fran and Jet were out stalking monsters, fighting them, and then training by themselves. As for me, I was still stuck in the pedestal and I could

only sense what they were doing using my Skills.

Skill Sharing had somehow advanced along with me getting stronger, increasing its effective distance. It could now reach all the way to the entrance of Area 4 without dropping. I wondered if it had something to do with the Garden and the pedestal.

I'd split up the Demon Wolf's Garden into separate areas back when I was here alone, but the old rating system was pretty much irrelevant considering its current situation.

It doesn't make much of a difference in Area 1, but all the monsters have gotten way stronger.

Before, Area 1 was home to goblins and weaker monsters. Areas 2 and 3 belonged to the F-Threats while Area 4 had E-Threats. Now, all the monsters that spawned there were one to two ranks higher.

D-Threats now spawned on the border of Areas 3 and 4. These used to only show up in the outer rim, Area 5, as area bosses. The Doppel Snake and Blast Tortoise, D-Threats I fought in the past, were two such area bosses.

Apparently, I was the reason behind them getting stronger—or rather, I was the reason they'd reverted to their original, mightier state.

Summoning and sealing me inside a sword required a lot of mana. The gods supplied most of the mana for the summoning and sealing process, but the pedestal actually took in mana from its surroundings. Probably because the gods of this world worked under various limitations; they couldn't rely on the ritual to go smoothly otherwise.

In order to successfully reincarnate me, the gods made up for the lack of mana by cranking the mana drain within the barrier to its highest capacity. The overall mana in the Demon Wolf's Garden had dropped back then, thereby spawning weaker monsters.

Honestly, the weakening of the local monsters had been a great boon to me. Not only was I able to survive the fights I got into, but I also got stronger. If the monsters had been as strong as usual, I probably would've been destroyed.

Even if I had somehow managed to survive the Demon Wolf's Garden, it

would've taken forever for me to leave. I could've been stuck here for years... and I wouldn't have been able to meet Fran.

The Goddess of Chaos told me that destiny didn't exist in this realm. That the future was something difficult to divine even for the gods. That everything was little more than a stack of coincidences.

Personally, I felt like my encounter with Fran was predestined. Was that just the Earthling in me talking?

Looks like they beat it.

Fran and Jet had been locked in combat for a while, but they finally gathered the materials of the monster they defeated and started heading home. They seemed pretty tired.

Welcome back. How'd it go?

"Hm. It was pretty strong."

I see.

Fran was still getting used to her new weapon art-focused approach. As usual, she fought without my guidance with a weapon nowhere near as strong as I was. In her current state, fighting a D-Threat was back-breaking business. Fran had already healed most of her wounds but I could still see the marks. Her now-weathered armor was streaked with her own blood.

Jet looked even worse than Fran. He'd taken the initiative of fighting in close quarters and took a lot of damage because of it. His evasive abilities had always been top-notch, but he wasn't great in melee combat. Monsters which specialized in defense and close combat were natural counters to the direwolf.

But there was probably a hidden reason as to why Jet was more heavily hurt than usual today. I suspect it was because of what Fenrir told him about evolution.

Jet could evolve into two species: the Gehenna Wolf, specialized in Deadly Venom Magic, or the Darknight Wolf, expert in Shadow Magic. Aside from their magic specializations, the two evolutions were quite alike. His stats wouldn't increase much but he would gain many command Skills like Command and

Leadership as well as Bird's-Eye View and Eagle Eye to increase his battlefield awareness.

Jet's stats *would* increase. He would become a B-Threat Lord-class monster, after all. But the bump in his stats wouldn't be much compared to the lone wolf types like the Inferno Wolf and Valkyrie Wolf. One might even say he would be significantly weaker than those two—a hard pill for the direwolf to swallow.

I thought about finding a pack of wolf monsters for Jet to control, but he wanted to stand by Fran's side to help her in battle. She was going to face even tougher enemies from here on out. He probably thought it would be difficult to hang back and support her from the rear. Our experience in the capital had taught him that much, and that was why he wanted to get stronger.

Fran understood how he felt. She would've been frustrated if someone had told her, "You won't be much stronger as an evolved Black Cat. You'll gain the ability to command other Black Cats, though."

She could only silently watch over Jet as he pushed himself.

And how did Jet do?

"He worked really hard."

I know, but it looks like it was a tough fight for him.

"Hm...the enemy was pretty strong."

Fran told me how the fight went down. They'd battled a thick-scaled lizard monster with the proportions of a gorilla. Fran had nailed down its movements with Sword Arts so Jet could go from behind, tearing at the jugular for the kill. Unfortunately, his bite wasn't enough to kill the creature, and it grabbed him and almost crushed him to death.

The monster was specialized in defense and had all the subtlety of a flying brick. Jet could've killed the creature alone without taking a scratch had he been patient, hung back and pelted it with spells. He should've let Fran deal the killing blow while supporting her. Instead, he rushed in for the kill.

He probably needed to do that in order to activate Predator. Jet had risked it all on that single Skill, but his recklessness only got him hurt this time.

Jet...

“Arf...”

Don't look so down, boy. I'd never seen our happy-go-lucky wolf look so depressed, but I sympathized with his frustrations.

“Jet's going to be a lot stronger, Teacher. He just needs a little more time.”

“Woof!”

I know, I get it. Trust me, I know how you feel, Jet.

“Arf?”

How could I not? I myself was stuck in this pedestal where the only thing I could do was watch. Just like Jet, I wanted to fight with Fran. *But don't be too reckless, all right?*

“Hm. Okay.”

“Arf!”

Good. Now—

But my words were cut short by an unfamiliar voice that resounded inside of me.

Diagnosis complete. Commencing restoration process. Personality will go to sleep for the duration of the restoration process. Now cutting off communications with outside world.

The voice sounded more mechanical than P.A. did.

Wait, hold on! Sleep?

Fenrir didn't tell me about this. The pedestal was starting to glow. This couldn't be good.

Estimated time of completion: 150 days.

A hundred and fifty days?! I'm not ready! *F-Fran! It looks like this is goodbye for now!*

“Teacher?”

“Arf?”

I can't talk during the restoration process! It'll be done in 150 days! I'm sorry! I didn't think it would be so sudden!

"Teacher!"

"Bark!"

Good luck on your training, but take care of yourself! Don't push yourself too hard! Get along with Jet! Listen to everything Amanda sa—

And then my consciousness went out.

True Prologue

HOW LONG was I lying there for?

I lay groaning, intense pain rushing through my body as my clouded eyes looked around for help. The tears pooling in my eyes only worsened my vision. The world was turning hazy. Is this what blood loss does to your vision?

I feebly reached for the sky. All I accomplished was dripping my own blood onto my body.

“Help...me...”

Every breath was agony.

“Hurg... Aagh...”

How did this happen to me...?! It hurts...it hurts...! Please, just...let it end...

“Ah...”

Huh. Doesn't hurt as bad anymore.

The bone-searing pain suddenly disappeared. Rather than agonizingly hot, the world now felt cold...not that cold was a good thing in this sort of situation, based on what I'd heard.

I guess it's time for me to go. I sighed, feeling the strength leave my body.

The car that ran me over, the child I pushed out of the way, the company I was working for, the VR game I'd been waiting for that was finally going to go on sale tomorrow... None of it mattered now. They all disappeared from my mind.

The only thing left was peace.

“Uhh...” My mouth could no longer move. But at least the pain was gone.

I really am dying.

Whiteness filled my field of vision. I felt a sense of release, as if I was floating in space. The pain was completely gone. I felt I could just stand up and walk

away like normal.

Which wasn't an option. I knew that my life was over.

"That's it, huh? I'm gonna die."

Indeed. You will die if nothing is done about you.

"Huh?"

Let us suppose there was a way to save you. What would you say?

Was I hallucinating?

And yet, the woman's voice was so clear. It was like she was speaking into my ears.

And the voice itself...she sounded ancient.

No, you are not hallucinating. I am here to save you.

A hallucination that said it wasn't a hallucination, eh? Heh...I really didn't want to die. And here I'd been, thinking I was oh-so-ready to go.

Must I keep telling you that I am no hallucination? Aah, but it is to be expected. Allow me to make things easier for you.

Snap.

There was the sound of snapping fingers—and then everything around me changed.

"What?"

"I bid thee welcome to my realm."

The asphalt I was lying on was replaced with a grass carpet.

I looked around. The white void remained, but the world which seemed so large and endless had a small expanse of land in the middle of it. The field was about the size of a schoolyard. A majestic stone structure lay at the center. It looked like some kind of temple. It reminded me of the pictures I'd seen of the Greek Parthenon.

The ground and the temple weren't the only thing that filled the white void.

"Well? Do you insist upon calling me a hallucination?"

A woman stood at the temple entrance. She wore a strange outfit and hairstyle, but it was her looks that were truly remarkable.

To put it simply, she was beauty itself.

She had an almost Japanese look to her. She was elegant beyond belief, glowing with an unsurpassable divinity. Hers was no natural beauty, but a supernatural one; it was as if an angel had incarnated herself within a perfectly carved statue. Inhumanly beautiful.

My breathing stopped short the moment I looked at her face, and it took a few moments before I regained enough composure to look at the rest of her. Like her face, the rest of her body was Japanese. Again, there was an ancient touch to her attire, but something wasn't quite right about it.

Instead of the long sleeves of a junihitoe, she wore a miniskirt reminiscent of the kunoichi in comic books. Frankly, she looked like she was cosplaying. Her clothes were thin and tight-fitting, and long slits ran down the hem. The otherwise cheap design was made divine by the mere fact that she was wearing it. It was strange.

Her clothes were as black as her long hair and eyes, but her collar and belt were scarlet. The color palette made it look even more like cosplay.

"Come."

"Pardon?"

The woman approached me and pulled me up to my feet. The warmth and softness of her skin was definitely no hallucination.

"I'm not dreaming...?"

"Indeed you are not. Finally, you understand. Granted, this is not my real form. This form is composed of aspects of my real form, combined with figments of your imagination."

"M-meaning?"

"It is a form based upon your vision of gods. 'Tis easier for us to speak in this manner."

Was this what I thought gods looked like in my head? A beautiful girl with thin

and tight-fitting clothes? I needed to have a word with my libido.

“So...you’re a god?”

“I am she who governs the underworld and reincarnation. As you understand it, I would be the god of the nether.”

“G-God of the Nether...? Y-you’re Hades? Wait, this is Japan so...Lord Enma? Izanami-no-Mikoto?”

“All correct, yet all mistaken. Let us set aside the issue of my divinity at the moment. Your current state is of far greater importance.”

That’s right. What happened to me? I should be dead now since I was talking to the god of the nether. But then she said there was a way I could be saved...

“That I did.”

Wow! So I can come back to life? That’s awesome! But hang on. I’m no saint or anyone important. Could a miracle even apply to me? Is this what I get for being killed by a god? Wait, no, I actually got hit by a car, so...wait, crap, I’ve been so impolite with her so far! I mean, I don’t even know what’s going on here! But she hasn’t been provoked to wrath or anything, so maybe she’s okay with it. I guess being a god means being big enough to not mind formalities. B-but I’ll gladly embrace formalities! Y’know! If she wants me to?

“Your thoughts buzz like a beehive.”

“Y-you think so?”

She seemed annoyed, but not angry. Good. At least I haven’t been rude enough to get my salvation revoked. This is great! Proceed then, great goddess! Tell me what I must do to save my life!

“A very busy mind...but also frightfully optimistic.”

“I get that a lot. People say I’m strangely optimistic. Maybe I’m just dense.”

“Then I am unsure if they were complimenting you. As for your salvation, it will depend on your response. You see, we have a favor to ask of you.”

“A favor...? From me?”

“Indeed. Will you lend an ear?”

“O-of course.”

“Very good. Come hither, then.”

“W-wait...!”

The god of the nether turned around to enter the temple. I wasn't sure if I had any right to enter. It was holy ground, after all...

“Come along then. Why do you tarry?”

“R-right away!” Whelp, guess that's an invite. But I was in for an even bigger surprise inside.

“Welcome. I am the God of the Silver Moon.”

“And I, the God of Chaos.”

Two more beautiful women awaited me inside the temple, their beauty rivaling that of the God of the Nether.

The woman called the God of the Silver Moon had shining, silver hair like her namesake. Her skin was white and soft, and she had golden eyes. The goddess' hair shimmered in the light as she moved. Her hair color was very close to something I'd use on a character in a video game, making her feel somewhat familiar to me. Her expression was motherly and merciful. She *really* looked the part of a goddess.

Meanwhile, the Goddess of Chaos had a mischievous look on her face. Hers was a different kind of beauty from the Goddess of the Silver Moon. Her crimson eyes looked as if they pierced through everything. Her skin was alluring, dark and supple. She wore her silver hair loose, almost disheveled behind her back. But it was a different kind of silver from the Goddess of the Silver Moon's hair, almost gray, which better suited her dark skin.

Beautiful goddesses wearing tight-fitting clothes. Did my imagination come up with these too? Scratch having a word with my libido, I needed to give my imagination a raise!

“Uhh...”

Seeing that I was tongue-tied, the God of the Nether motioned to the other goddesses.

“These two are my associates. They are also the ones who have asked for you. You can say that they are the leaders of this initiative. I am merely helping.”

“We have a favor to ask of you.”

“Will you hear us out?”

“S-sure.”

The three goddesses told me that they weren’t goddesses from Earth but another world...a world different from Earth. These were the gods who created and governed that world.

But that wasn’t even the most surprising revelation I received—not that I wasn’t shocked to hear about the existence of gods and other worlds or anything. But the next thing they said was more shocking.

If I died here, I would be put back into Earth’s wheel of reincarnation. But the goddesses wanted me to reincarnate in the world that they were in charge of.

“It would be a simple thing for me to transport your soul into our world,” said the God of the Nether. The goddesses were formerly those of our own Earth, and therefore had some power left in our realm. For instance, the God of the Nether could still call upon the dead of our world.

“So you used to be gods of Earth? Wait, and you want me to go to a new world...? *An actual reincarnation to another world?*”

This was a lot to take in. I didn’t think that something like this could happen to me. Something so...so fictional!

“But...why?”

“Now, now. Calm down and we’ll explain everything.”

I wasn’t going to get to be reborn for free, of course. I’d have a mission to accomplish once I reincarnated in their world.

The goddesses showed me images of their world. Told me all about the war between the gods and all that happened afterwards. I would reincarnate into a sword in order to save Fenrir and the God of Evil, both of whom were sealed away. All I had to do, they said, was fight some monsters in order to accomplish it...but I knew that it wasn’t going to be that easy.

But they also told me that an Earthling was able to repel the Evil One's influence...

"Please. We want you to save them."

"Hmm...a reincarnation into a sword...? And I'll lose all my memories?"

"Not exactly. Your memories will be sealed away for a time. The full mind of a man would be unhinged by a transformation into a sword."

"Most of your memories of your friends and family shall be sealed away, as shall the cause of your death."

"Memories of intense emotions, happy or sad, will also be sealed away because of their effects on the makeup of your personality."

"Some of your memories of passion will be sealed away—specifically, your first sexual encounter and your past relationships with the opposite sex."

So...all of the memories that were deeply meaningful to me, as well as the ones that deeply impacted my personality.

"You will regain your memories once we have determined that you have grown accustomed to life as a sword and will be able to retain your sanity. We know not what might happen to you if you were to enter the cycle without these precautions," said the God of the Nether.

"And I suppose your personality might change while your memories are sealed away," the God of Chaos added.

"It might *what*?" That was a scary thought. Would I stop being me?

"Your personality comes from the memories of your life, after all," said the God of Chaos.

"The seal upon your memories will certainly affect your personality," said the God of the Silver Moon.

"I see. When you put it that way, I guess there's nothing to be done."

"But your personality shouldn't change much. You will not become a stranger to yourself."

"Indeed. If an acquaintance were to meet you, they would ask you if you were

having a bad day, at worst.”

“And your personality will return once the seal upon your memories is lifted.”

I was still doubtful, but I figured it would be fine as long as I could still get my memories back. Besides, these were gods talking. If they said it was going to be okay, it was going to be okay.

“So uh, what happens if I di—I mean, get destroyed in the other world? What happens then?”

“You will return to the wheel of reincarnation on Earth...but that will not be all. You were tasked with a mission, after all.”

I would reincarnate back on Earth instead of the other world. The God of the Nether also hinted that I would be given preferential treatment, although I wouldn't remember any of this.

“And if I refuse to become a sword?” I asked cautiously.

“Save your trembling mortal fears. We will not sentence you with a punishment for refusing. You will simply return to the wheel of reincarnation, and we shall move on to the next candidate.”

I wasn't the first interviewee, it seemed. There were others before me... others who refused. I was nervous and scared, but I had made up my mind.

“All right. I'll reincarnate into a sword.”

“And you are certain?” asked the God of the Nether.

“No going back,” added the God of the Silver Moon.

“Yep. If I'm going to die, might as well go see what other worlds are like. I'll be free to live my life once I finish the mission, right?”

“That you will.”

“Just one thing, though. Can you wipe my hard drive? I know it sounds like a trifling thing, but...”

“Yes, of course,” the God of the Nether said. “Consider it done.”

I didn't think I'd ask the gods to clean up after me. Still, their reincarnation candidate care was top-notch. They would erase the gruesome details of my

death from the mind of the girl I saved, delete the data from my PC, and hide my adult literature where no one could find it.

But look. Those weren't the reasons why I agreed to becoming a sword. I'd always dreamed of reincarnating with cheat skills, and this way, there was a good chance this next life would be a happy one too. Besides, based on what the gods showed me about this other world and the original form of the Evil One—

“There are two more people we would like you to meet.”

As I was making excuses to no one in particular, two new figures (?) appeared in front of me. I couldn't quite make out what one of them looked like.

“I am the God of Knowledge. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“And I am Futsunushi, God of Swords.”

“H-hello. The pleasure is all mine.”

The God of Knowledge was androgynously attractive, with both male and female beauty traits. They had silky blonde hair, with round, thin-framed glasses and a kariginu which concealed the defining features of their slender body. This god was probably also fashioned from my imagination. As for the glasses? C'mon. God of Knowledge here. Can't have that without glasses.

But the last god looked the strangest of all.

“L-Lord Futsunushi? You have a name?”

Unlike the other gods, Futsunushi had announced his name. In fact, Futsunushi was quite famous in Japan for being the god of swords.

“And your form...” I could only describe him as being a black shadow. A humanoid wrapped in flickering darkness.

I wasn't sure if this was how I imagined the god of swords would be. If it was up to me, the god of swords would be a pretty lady in samurai armor.

“He is the only god among us who has a name. He summoned part of his Earthly divinity in the war against the Evil One, and is now bound by the name he had once abandoned.”

Then I remembered—back when they were showing me images of the war between the gods, there'd been a god who wielded a giant sword to fight the God of Evil.

When the gods crossed over to a new world, they abandoned their old names and were reborn anew. These new gods might even be composed of multiple divinities who'd taken an interest in the new world. But to defeat the Evil One, the God of Swords had invoked his name as Futsunushi in order to unleash his true power...also causing him to be bound to his old name and office, unlike the new gods, who were free to be what they wished.

"I cannot change form, for I have been bound to my name. But man may not see the true face of a god and live. For that reason, I ask that you pardon my current form."

The nameless gods were free to change their shape, while Futsunushi wasn't.

"The Godsword you will become shall be a vassal of the God of Swords and the God of Wisdom. That is the reason they are here."

The goddesses then proceeded to show me the memories of mine which would be sealed away. It was...a very embarrassing experience, though it didn't start out too bad. First were the memories of the physical and emotional suffering I endured when I died. Then it was the memories of my favorite movies and the VR game I was currently hooked on. There were a lot of touching and emotional memories in here, too.

And then it got much more personal...

"Memories of a popular movie. A movie you saw on your first date. It left a deep impression upon you," the God of the Silver Moon said.

Seeing it again brought back some bittersweet emotions.

"Your first photography collection of an idol. Her mammaries are prodigious," said the God of the Nether.

Stop! You don't have to show my favorite page!

"The love letter you wrote for your crush," the God of Chaos said. "Not that you ever gave it to her."

Nooo! My cringiest stories! You don't have to read it out loud!

"The memories of your beloved dog."

We used to own a mongrel named Fran, a cute little thing that looked like a white mop. My mother called me one day to tell me that it had died, and I flew home immediately. She said it was its time, but I still wondered if there was anything I could do to save it. For a while, I cried every time I saw a dog that looked like Fran.

The sealing process kept going through some emotional memories until something piqued my curiosity. I also wanted to distract myself.

"I know that the memories of video games and my death are important enough to be erased, but are you sure I can keep my general knowledge?"

Knowledge was the greatest of all cheat skills in reincarnation fiction. New knowledge could bring about social revolution and cultural advancement. In some cases, it might cause great chaos. Gigabytes of this plotline graced the internet.

But the Goddess of Chaos answered simply, "Your knowledge couldn't hurt a fly."

Nope! Guess my knowledge wasn't enough to be a cheat skill. Of course not!

"Besides, you studied the humanities in school, didn't you? You possess no knowledge of the sciences to give you an advantage. As for the rest of your knowledge bases, well...that knowledge already exists in this new world."

Examples of the kind of knowledge that might constitute an advantage were soap, well pumps, liquor distillation, movable type, and gunpowder. Soap and liquor distillation were simple and useful enough to quickly spread through the world. Pumps and movable type were already reproduced by magic and manatech. There are also magical components which mimicked the effects of gunpowder. This world might seem like it was still in the Middle Ages, but its technology was closer to Earth's.

Anyway, it's not like I was a scientist. The knowhow of an average Joe like me probably wouldn't come in handy, regardless.

“Also, your knowledge of Terran physics and science won’t help you much there.”

“Really?”

“Ours is a world like Earth, but not quite the same. Even the animals that look similar to Terran fauna are different creatures. The same goes for matter. The atmospheric makeup is different enough that mana exists.”

This world had not just laws of physics, but laws of mana.

“Ours is a world where water may be compressed, ice burned, gravity and air manipulated by way of magical manipulation. The laws of nature exist side by side with the laws of magic. Do you really think your half-baked knowledge of Earthly science will help you?”

“No...” There goes whatever worry I had about me spreading forbidden knowledge.

The civilization of the world I was headed for was quite different from Earth. Speech, writing, money, weights and measures...the gods had provided all of these from the moment of creation, and they were all still in use thousands of years later. Dialects had developed in that period of time, but that was about it. These things were given to the people by the gods, after all. No one would go out of their way to change them.

So it was with knowledge. There was a good chance that the people of this world would refuse novel ideas, even if they were offered to them.

“They’re pretty much using the same tools they used thousands of years ago.”

“Pardon my saying this, but it sounds like civilization has gone stagnant.”

“To an Earthling like you, perhaps. We prefer to think of it not as stagnation, but as maintenance. Meanwhile, the Terran race of humanity keeps on advancing civilization to sate its insatiable appetite. You call yourselves rulers of the planet while destroying the realm you claim to rule. The funniest part is that you don’t even seem to have noticed. Even we gods couldn’t devise such a perfect cosmic joke.”

She had me there. Other worlds like this might seem like realms where

civilization had ground to a halt, but from the gods' perspective, they were places in which man and nature could live together in a balance.

"Besides, it isn't as though nothing has changed over the past few millennia. Magical researchers develop new ways of using mana, along with manatech and medicine. I think they've made quite a bit of progress in the past hundred thousand years."

So while Earth focused on science, this world focused on magic.

"Anyway, we should go back to sealing your memories."

"Oh, of course."

"First up."

"The first time you lay in bed with a woman. A bitter experience. An escapade that ended in failure."

Stop! Don't look at that!

And now the process turned from embarrassing to downright torturous. Just kill me now! Or, uh, kill me again?!

My first time at a cabaret club? Look, my senior dragged me there, I was forced to go! Yes, I know I bought some racy DVDs, you don't have to show me each one!

The beautiful goddesses kept running their color commentary, which only made things worse. By the end of it all, I'd crumpled to the floor in exhaustion. They said some stuff about giving me powers, but I couldn't remember what they were. I was at their mercy at this point.

With my preparations settled, the goddesses dragged me to the center of the temple.

"Now, touch the sword."

"Oh, is this going to be my new body?"

"Yes. The Godsword Cherubim. Touch its hilt."

"A-all right."

I obeyed the Goddess of the Nether and the Goddess of the Silver Moon and

reached for the sword.

“Wha—?!”

“Be still. There is nothing to fear.”

“Indeed. Calm yourself.”

What is this?! It's like my body's melting into the sword! I can feel it! I'm gonna be sick!

As fear of this unknown sensation seized me, the Goddess of Chaos spoke.

“The next time we meet, you will have finished your mission. Aside from any anomalies, at least.”

“Anomalies...?”

“I’m sure you’ve gathered by now that we are neither omniscient nor omnipotent. The unforeseen may yet happen.”

Do I just nod and say ‘I see’ here?

“But even if we were to meet again, we would act as if it were our first meeting.”

“Huh? Why’s that?”

“How much would your memories be affected if you found out you were sent on a mission by the gods? Your seal might break, don’t you think?”

“I-I see.” Given that these gods weren’t exactly almighty, I guess there really *was* a chance that the memory seal might break.

“One more thing.”

“Y-yes?”

“Take care of her for us, won’t you?”

“Her...you don’t mean Fenrir, do you?”

“No. Fenrir is a vassal of the Goddess of the Silver Moon. Not unimportant, but *she* simply outweighs him.”

“The Evil One...? No. The Goddess of Battle.”

“Indeed. Our poor, foolish, brave, beloved, precious little sister.”

“I’ll try, but I can’t make any promises.”

“We know that. You wouldn’t remember any promises you made here, in any case. Your memories of this place will be sealed away.”

“R-right.”

“You don’t sound confident. The system your powers are running on is my own creation. You can do anything with this system if you apply a bit of hard work. Granted, I may have had a little too much fun making it. It was *such* excellent play.”

“Play?”

This reincarnation business is pretty important. You can’t just play with it like that...!

“But play, too, is important. Sure, the mission is vital, but it is also important that you enjoy the world when you get there. So get out there and play, understand?”

“S-sure.”

Okay, I get that play is important, but just don’t play with me!

“In closing, best of luck.”

“Huh? What?”

“And may you have a blessed chaos.”

Waaaaaaait!

Chapter 4:

Rebirth

“NOW, JET!”

“Grrrr!”

Jet used Greater Shapeshift to enlarge his already gigantic body even further and brought his tail down like a hammer on the giant monster we were fighting. The gray fur running down his back made the dire wolf look like a falling star.

I couldn't help but think to myself: *man, he's huge*. Jet was probably several times bigger than before, spanning ten meters from nose to tail. He was also taller, and his legs were as thick as logs.

But his heavier frame didn't cause him to slow down. If anything, his increased strength made him much faster. Gigantic as he was, he was as stealthy as ever; his feet fell silently on the ground.

Jet closed in on our target while perfectly dodging every attack it threw. He brought his gigantic paws down on the head of the Invisible Death, cracking its hard crystal shell. This wasn't enough to take the formidable monster down, but it still sent a shock through the creature's skull. Jet had given it a slight concussion, enough to stop the monster in its tracks.

This was our chance.

“I'm going in!”

Go for it!

Fran fell from the sky, swinging me in a great arc.

“BROOOOORGH!”

But the B-Threat wasn't about to die that easily. It raised its crystal scales and fired them at Fran in a lethal volley while also sniping her with its tail.

Fran didn't even blink. She calmly defended herself against the scales with a combination of agility and swordplay. Usually, this would be the point where

she teleported away and reapproached the enemy with a chain of Air Hops. The resulting attack would have been sloppy at best. But Fran was now in complete control of her mana. Her Air Hops now looked like she was running on the ground.

Such were the fruits of her training. She deflected the monster's tail snipes with perfectly executed Sword Arts while maintaining a steady offense with those same arts.

Fran was still subject to gravity, though, and she was falling slowly through the sky. Her attacks only multiplied as she got closer and closer to the Invisible Death, but she didn't let up her defense for a second. She weaved through the storm of bullets with perfect ease.

There was no pride in her eyes as she looked down on the monster beneath her. This victory was nothing to be proud of. No, it had simply been inevitable.

"Taking it down!"

Got it!

"Flashing Thunderclap!"

And so Fran moved to seal her win.

"Yaaaah!"

"Groooar!"

There!

The Invisible Death retaliated with its scales and light spells. Now that Fran was on offense, I went on defense. My enhanced precision allowed me to pluck the scales that were about to hit Fran out of the air while deflecting the creature's light spells with my own dark spells.

We were closer to the monster now. Fran used an Advanced Sword Art and brought down her black lightning-wrapped sword on the monster's shell, trying to carve it in half. The Invisible Death—with its giant crystals, heavy barrier, and formidable shell—was now no match for us.

The art itself wasn't anything special. Fran had just gotten much stronger. Her black lightning was enhanced with my Elemental Blade and sliced through the

creature's shell to burn it from within. The monster wasn't down yet, but Fran remained calm as ever.

"Tsh!"

"Groooooar..."

She cast a spell to reveal the Invisible Death's crystal and pierced right through it with me. We'd almost died fighting an Invisible Death last time, but now it was an easy win. We were much more experienced now, sure, but Fran and Jet were far stronger than before.

You're so strong now, Fran.

"You're repeating yourself, Teacher."

I can't help myself. I'm just so happy when I see how much you've grown.

"But it's been over a month."

Even then!

"Besides, I didn't change as much as Jet did."

Not your looks, at least! Besides, Jet looks totally different now.

"Woof?"

Jet, now the size of a cow, approached Fran. She gave him a good petting.

The thing that changed most about him was his fur. It was still black with red mixed in, but the red was more prominent, with two new streaks of silver running down his back. He'd also got much fluffier, as shown by the increased frequency of Fran fluffing him up.

You guys did great for getting so strong over a short period of time.

"Woof!"

"Hm!"

Suddenly, the voice of a woman, inanimate but kind, rang in our ears.

Skills acquired from Invisible Death crystal. Synthesizing common Skills into Advanced Skills.

"Hm.

P.A. was back. She still wasn't as strong as before, but she was back. She couldn't freely converse like when we used Unleash Potential, but she was at least as strong as when I first arrived in the world. Consuming Fanatix was the right decision.

Now that P.A. was managing my background systems, spells and telekinesis took much less effort to use. Fran could also hear her voice now.

I tried explaining to her everything that happened, but she didn't quite get the whole thing. Fran just thought of her as a spirit that was living inside me.

I had also told Fran about the memories I'd recovered—of my death and how I became a sword. The Goddess of Chaos had visited me before my maintenance was over and awakened them, saying it might have an adverse effect on the memory seal if I fixated on my lost memories for too long. But she only gave me back part of my memories, because I would've lost my mind if I got them *all* back. That's the worst part of remembering, I guess.

I made sure to leave out all my racy memories, of course. Fran was too young for those. How was I supposed to explain that part, anyway? The gods thought I might be tempted by my sexual memories, so they sealed them away? I might die of embarrassment if I had to tell her that.

But wow...it's almost been a month since I came back, huh?

"Hm."

Our teamwork's perfect now.

"Pitch-perfect."

"Woof!"

Our fighting styles were all confused when I came back. Fran and Jet looked different, and P.A.'s support increased my combat prowess. We worked on our teamwork for the better part of a month. This battle was the result of that training.

Our teamwork wasn't the only thing that was shot when I came back. It was a crazy time...

One month ago.

What is this...?

My body was floating, like it had been released from the pressure of weight.

I think I was at the bottom of the ocean, slowly being lifted from the water by a ray of light. Or maybe I was being pulled out of a gravity well by an anti-gravitational force.

In any case, I felt a mixture of both relief and refreshment. It was a very strange sensation.

Where am I, anyway?

Everything around me was dark. I couldn't see anything.

What was I doing again? I felt like I'd been asleep for a long time. But instead of feeling the drowsiness of a long slumber, I felt light as a feather, even if I did still feel half asleep.

"Still in dreamland, sleepyhead? I need to talk to you."

Huh? I heard a woman's voice when I was spacing out. She sounded mischievous and sensual. A voice I would never forget. *Goddess of Chaos?*

"I thought I'd speak to you before you fully reawakened."

I couldn't see her, but I knew the Goddess of Chaos was talking to me.

"First of all, I will release the seal on part of your memories."

What, really? That came out of nowhere. I thought I'd lose my mind if I got those back.

"You seem fixated on your memory loss, and it will have an adverse effect on the seal if you keep it up."

Adverse effect?

"You're going to keep trying to remember a memory you can't remember, won't you?"

True.

That nagging feeling was apparently enough to disrupt the memory seal, which might cause a chain reaction to my other memories.

“You don’t want to lose your mind like Fanatix, do you?”

Fanatix had mentioned the dangers of a human soul trapped inside a sword. I knew it well enough, too. But after seeing the Godsword’s insanity, I wanted nothing to do with it.

“And so we have presently decided to undo the seal on a part of your memories. Prepare yourself.”

Huh? Wai—

Before I could answer, a flood of memories rushed through my mind.

Urgh...

The sensation was indescribable. It didn’t hurt or sting but was nauseating. It was the same kind of sensation as when I Cannibalized Fanatix but less intense.

Memories of my time as a human and being hit by a car returned to me. The identities of the three women were revealed to me by a memory hidden away in the nooks and crannies of my mind, and with it, the scene of my memories being sealed away.

But I had yet to recover all of my memories. The memories of my reincarnation were still vague. Especially the part between me touching Cherubim and waking up in the pedestal.

Still, it answered the great question of why my memories were missing... though it reminded me of some very painful moments. Like when the three goddesses embarrassed me by rifling through my memories... I didn’t have any weird kinks, so that experience was just painful.

I didn’t mind the memories of my death. Not anymore. Fran had endured worse injuries than I ever had. Besides, I would never have met Fran if I hadn’t been hit by that car. How could I possibly hold a grudge now?

“What is it?”

N-nothing. Now that I have my memories back, can I just keep doing what I have been doing until now?

“Yes. You needn’t to worry about that. I’m not going to work you like a horse and order you to speed up your mission.”

Good. Getting stronger by collecting crystals should automatically heal Fenrir, anyway.

“But you know,” the Goddess of Chaos mused, “you were hit by a car trying to save a little girl on Earth. Here, you saved a little girl on the brink of death...do you have a thing for little girls?”

D-don’t say it like that! You make me sound like a pedo!

“I’m kidding.” She chuckled. “In any case, we’re out of time.”

Wha—?

“It’s time for you to wake up.”

So the restoration is finished? I hadn’t felt this awake in a long time. Not since I said goodbye to Fran at the pedestal. I hadn’t felt anything since then. But even so, I knew that I was asleep.

“Tell the little black cat I said hi,” the goddess smiled. “May you have a blessed chaos.”

That’s the second time I’d heard her say that! Was it her catchphrase or something?

Wait. Second time? I feel like I’ve heard it once before...or maybe I’m imagining things.

Sixty seconds until Specimen Teacher fully awakens.

Huh?

An inanimate yet warm voice greeted me after the Goddess of Chaos’ departure.

P.A!

Yes.

Wait, you can talk now?

At present, I am able to merely hold a conversation with you. I will, however,

return to my former state soon. I am currently borrowing the energy of this personality as an emergency measure while he is asleep.

Uhh...personality?

Is she talking about me? Did that mean that P.A. could talk to me now because she was using some of my powers?

Subject P.A. will be deprived of power once Specimen Teacher fully awakens. Before that happens... I would like to thank you again, Teacher.

Huh?

You have given me another chance to be useful to the User.

But you said you'll be deprived of power. You'll be going back to sleep.

My odds of recovering Fenrir's powers are now at 77 percent. I have also recovered some of my frozen permissions.

So you're feeling better now?

Yes. Consuming the virtual personalities of the discarded Godsword expanded my operation domain.

I guess she was saying eating Fanatix was the right thing to do.

It is time.

P.A! If Fenrir gets better, you'll get better! I promise I'll do my best to save you!

Thank you—

And then the world around me changed.

The inky blackness around me was pierced by a ray of light. The light expanded and exploded, dispelling the darkness instantaneously. I didn't have retinas to see what was happening directly, but I imagine it would've been like getting hit with a flash-bang at point-blank range.

Color returned.

Blue skies. Green fields.

And standing at the center of it all, a girl. Her black hair was messy, but her

skin was nice and healthy. Her body was flat without any curves. She had black cat ears on her head and a tail to go with it. Her large eyes were filled with determination.

I recognized her in an instant. She was someone I would never forget.

Fran.

My partner. Fran.

“Teacher?”

Hi.

Fran answered me in a small voice, as if making sure she wasn't hearing things. I responded at a similar volume.

There was so much I wanted to say that I couldn't say anything.

For me, it felt like I had woken up after a good night's sleep. My lack of a body meant that prolonged slumber had no effect on me. But I just knew that I missed her. If I had tear ducts, they would be flooding right about now.

“Teacher...”

Fran.

“Teacher!”

Fran ran towards me and hugged me while I was still in the pedestal. She wasn't just embracing me, she was practically crushing me with her arms. An inferior sword would've been crushed into scrap metal, I bet. A non-combatant would probably be dead. Her embrace was that strong.

But I was happy to see it. Fran's lack of control only showed me how lonely she had felt. She missed me so much that she couldn't hold back.

“Teacher...”

I'm back, Fran.

“Hm...!”

I used telekinesis to wipe away the tears that were gathering at the edge of her eyes. Fran leaned into it, rubbing her head against my hilt for affection.

You'll hurt your head if you rub it that hard.

"I'll be fine."

I was petting Fran's head when I heard a mysterious noise.

Rumble...!

Huh? Well, it was no mystery to me. Fran's stomach was rumbling. In the middle of our tearful reunion.

Grumble!

"I'm hungry..."

Five months later, Fran was still Fran. I didn't know whether to be happy that she remained as she was or lament her lack of maturity. She didn't look much different, either.

She rubbed her stomach with her left hand while holding me with her right. She then turned to me with a stern look on her face. "Teacher."

Y-yeah?

"Take out the curry."

C-curry?

"Hm!" Fran's gaze was intense. She was happy that I was finally back. It wasn't just because she could finally restock her curry supply...right? "Curry."

"Woof!"

A-all right, all ri—Huh?

"Bark, bark!"

Jet had joined us at some point. He must have come out of Fran's shadow. He was so much bigger now, though.



Essentially, he was the same direwolf he'd been before. He still had his lustrous black coat, but there were some differences to it now. He'd had flecks of red fur before, but only around his neck. Now, there were streaks of deep red on his neck, legs, and tip of his tail. It was all over him. There was also a line of silver running down his back. The aura he emanated was different, too. In a word, he looked impressive.

Jet had definitely evolved.

Jet, you've—

Rumble, rumble, grumble!

You're hungry, too! I don't even have time to be shocked!

"Teacher...curry..."

Aah, sorry about that! Here! You want extra spicy, right, Jet?

"And extra-large!"

"Woof, woof!"

In that case you can have an ultra large plate of curry with ten terrific toppings. And Jet, you can have the super-hot curry instead.

"Yeah!"

"Awooo!"

Fran and Jet immediately got to devouring the curry I served them. It was like they hadn't eaten in days. I was worried that they wouldn't be able to finish it all, but they put it away nice and easy.

Had they been eating right? I had cooked them a good amount of food outside the Withering Forest, and Fran should still have some left over in her Pocket Dimension...

Wait! Did Skill Sharing deactivate?!

If it did, she wouldn't have been able to use Pocket Dimension or Cooking. Surviving in the Garden would've been far more difficult.

Fran...you've worked so hard—

“Hm? I had all my Skills.”

What? So Skill Sharing was still on?

“Hm.”

Then why do you want curry so much...?

“Because Fran finished all of their curry in the first two months.”

Oh, so that's why... I was usually there to manage her food. She would only stick to eating her favorite food if there was no one around to stop her. Surprisingly, Fran had managed to keep herself fit. I would've been shocked if she'd gotten chubby in five months!

Want some, Amanda?

Amanda had a wry smile on her face. She'd been here all along, but I'd put off addressing her, since we didn't need to hide anything from her.

“I'm fine, thanks. Would you mind telling me what you've been through, though?”

Only the bits that I'm allowed to. Actually, I'm more interested in what happened while I was asleep.

“Sure. I can fill you in. There's lots to talk about.”

Thanks. I don't think Fran's gonna let go any time soon.

“Munch, munch, munch!”

“Scarf, scarf, scarf!”

“No, it doesn't look that way...”

Their meal would take a while to finish even with their empty stomachs.

Maybe I should take out a bed so they could take a post-meal nap.

ASIDE: AMANDA

FRAN WAS DEPRESSED for a while after you disappeared. She didn't show it, but her eyes and her voice...they were so lifeless. She would bury herself in Jet's fur and look at the stars at night. It made her look like the young girl she was, for once.

But after a couple of days, she slowly returned to her usual self.

"Let's do our best. Think of how you can surprise Teacher when he comes back!"

"Hm!"

"I won't hold back on training you, either!"

"Just the way I like it."

Fran's determination was the real deal. In fact, I scolded her a few times for being too enthusiastic.

Every time I returned from Alessa, I found her armor heavily damaged, and that wasn't all. The sword I got her would be broken and she'd be in the middle of healing her wounds.

Time after time, she was beaten by a powerful monster. Time after time, she decided not to retreat and challenged it again. Fran restlessly repeated this cycle.

But I knew she wasn't going to slow down even if I asked, and I didn't have the right to tell her to stop. Fran was already a mature adventurer. She could make her own decisions and live with the consequences. Even if that meant getting injured or dying during training. I've put myself through some crazy training before, so I know how hard it would've been to talk her out of it.

The best I could do was visit the Garden more often to make sure that Fran didn't die in the middle of training. But something about Fran and Jet changed after the first month. The spirit in their eyes was fading.

Their eating habits had changed, too. They'd had this thing called curry—this brown sauce served on a bed of rice—for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. But they started having it less frequently. They started having it once a day, then once every three days, until eventually they stopped having it altogether.

The dish was apparently Fran's favorite, but getting the ingredients together and cooking it was difficult. In her case, she could cook it but lacked the ingredients. I ended up getting her the curry spices from Alessa. She then sprinkled it atop of some meat and called it a day.

If Fran had had an infinite amount of curry, she probably could've gotten a lot more out of her training.

"Let's see if you can dodge this one."

"Ha! Huh!"

"Good! That's the way to do it! Read the enemy's intentions and don't let them bait you!"

"Hm!"

Fran's movements got faster and sharper by the day. I lashed my whip at her with an uncaring face, but I was breaking out in a cold sweat on the inside. The time was coming when she'd finally land a hit on me in a weapons-only match—a match where I should've had the advantage.

There wasn't much of a gap between our weapon mastery Skills. Actually, Fran had the upper hand as far as Skill level was concerned. My advantage came from experience. But Fran was closing that gap at a rapid pace.

I wanted to take all the credit and say that her improvements were all thanks to our sparring matches, but those weren't the only training methods that Fran employed. Fighting monsters was another such exercise. She'd take on a D-Threat and fight it only using Sword Arts. Sometimes she'd restrict herself to only using spells. As for me, I just hung around as insurance.

What I found most interesting was how she'd look like she was spacing out... and then quickly move. You'd think she was getting some outside advice and acting on it somehow, but I didn't sense anyone around that she could talk to.

Fran told me that it was the spirit of the sword, but I didn't sense any spirits around, either. She said it with a straight face, so I thought she might be training her joke-telling skills along with everything else. Maybe she had adjusted her movements after reviewing everything in her mind. I just didn't know what she was talking about.

"There goes your sword again."

"Hm..."

Her weapon was the biggest problem.

Fran had several weapons stowed away in Pocket Dimension, some of them even enchanted swords. None of them could hold up to her strength. Even the strongest of the bunch, the Enchanted Phantom Augite Blade, broke within the first two weeks.

I would sell the materials Fran had gathered in Alessa to buy new swords for her, but none of them made the cut. Fortunately, it all worked out because restricting herself to fighting with weaker swords made for good training. But she was having a hard time until Aristeia showed up.

Aristeia the Godsmith came to the Demon Wolf's Garden in winter, when it started snowing. We didn't notice her arrival at the pedestal because of her powerful stealth manatech, though. I almost had a heart attack. Can you imagine? The woman was more powerful than she let on, and she has a stock of powerful weapons to boot. I thought she was part of Raydoss' special forces. I was about ready to throw down.

Apparently, she felt the same way about me. We would've started killing each other if Fran hadn't stepped in.

We became fast friends once we started talking, though. She's a good person.

Aristeia crafted a sword made of refined enchanted steel for Fran in less than a week. She really was a Godsmith. I ended up asking her if she could make me a whip, too. She said she would do it if she had the materials, so I'll probably be busy gathering them next year.

Anyway, she isn't here right now because I asked if she would take on a request for me. Not the whip, though. Something else. She'd had the same idea

and accepted it immediately.

Fran's training days continued. Jet lost his right leg and right eye after pushing it too hard one day. This happened a few days after that.

"Tsch! There!"

"Urgh...ha!"

"I can't believe it...!"

Fran had deflected my Whip Arts with her Sword Arts and weaved right through my offense. But this was still within my expectations.

I pulled back my whip and kicked her. Fran would probably dodge it, but I just needed a split second to bring my whip back to me.

What she did next exceeded my expectations. She dodged my kick ever-so-slightly faster than I thought she would. She was only a few fractions of a second faster than my projections, but the fact remained that she had surpassed them.

And then, faster than my whip could deflect her blade, Fran stabbed me. Probably a Dagger Art. Her control was fantastic, minimizing the recovery time and gaps in her sword art. She seamlessly blended Sword Mastery and Sword Arts, and had perfect spatial awareness of her surroundings. Bringing it all together was lightning-fast decision-making. All of it came together to make her offense unblockable.

"That was perfect! You finally got the drop on me."

"Hm! But I'm not finished yet."

I giggled. "Of course not. Let's go again."

"Hm."

Fran is going to be absurdly powerful one day. I couldn't wait until her training ended.

A month passed. Jet kept fighting despite losing an eye and a leg, and he managed to achieve a surprising evolution. This took place several days after that.

“What’s wrong, Fran? Aren’t you supposed to be training?”

Fran was up early that day. She was sitting next to the pedestal, knees pulled up to her chest. Beside her, Jet was heeling with polite expectancy.

I asked her why she seemed so happy. The answer surprised me.

“Hm. Teacher’s coming back.”

“What? Are you sure?”

“Teacher said he’d be back in 150 days. Today’s the 150th day.”

“What about the sword spirit you were talking about?”

I couldn’t hear it, but Fran really was hearing the voice of a sword spirit. I couldn’t believe it at first, but I was compelled to after seeing how fast she progressed by taking her advice. She said the spirit’s name was P.A.—short for Public Announcement—a strange name for a spirit.

The spirit didn’t answer all of her questions, but she gave reports on Teacher’s condition, the progress of his restoration, and combat advice.

“She doesn’t know how long it’s going to take exactly but it should be soon. It might be two hours or two days.”

“Two days?”

“Hm.” Fran nodded before returning her gaze to the pedestal.

“You’re going to wait...?”

“Hm.” She looked at me like I had asked an obvious question. She really was going to wait for Teacher to come back.

“I-I guess I’ll wait with you...”

Hurry back, Teacher!

ASIDE: FENRIR

MY VASSAL, the tiny wolf, was fretting.

He didn't want to simply be of use to his masters. He wanted to fight alongside them.

That was all he wanted, but strong as Jet was, it would be difficult to achieve.

"Woof, woof. Arf!"

Jet took a devastating attack from a monster much stronger than him. I knew what he was going for. To get stronger, he'd use Predator on these powerful monsters in order to achieve his evolution. There was nothing unreasonable about this method.

Monsters have been known to evolve by taking in energy from the creatures they ate. This mutation was all the more possible for Jet because he was a Unique.

But consuming the flesh of C-Threats wasn't going to be enough. Although they were stronger than Jet was, race, level, and compatibility all played a part in the predation process. In order for Jet to reach a new evolution, he would need to eat the flesh of an A-Threat or stronger and lots of it. It needed to be the right kind of monster, too.

Deep down, Jet knew this. That was why he was pushing himself to fight stronger and stronger monsters...but pushing himself would cost him much.

"Gyaaooooon!"

"Jet!"

Jet howled in pain as he was tossed through the air. The small wolf was fighting a bipedal monster that stood fifteen meters high. A tail still supported it however, making it a false biped.

It was the Brutal Dragon, a part of the Earth Dragon genus; dragons that possess small wings in exchange for larger legs. The Brutal Dragon was a force

to be reckoned with physically, with tough scales and powerful muscles. The attacks it delivered with its forearms were worthy of a B-Threat. Jet had had a difficult time enough with the Brute Lizard, the Brute Dragon's weaker cousin. There was no way he could defeat this monster.

Jet was sent flying fifty meters away. He was twitching on the ground, dripping with blood. His innards were spilling out of his stomach and his right foot was torn off. His spine and neck were broken, half of his face crushed. He probably had brain damage now.

Unconscious. Couldn't even run.

I could only watch my poor vassal. There was nothing I could do. Even though Jet was my vassal, this Godbeast was nothing more than a soul on the brink of death.

"Haaaa!" Fran stepped in to save him. She fired thunder spells at the brutal dragon to draw its attention and started healing Jet. But his wounds ran deeper than she expected. "Come on! Greater Heal! Greater Heal!"

"Arooo..."

"Why isn't it working...?"

Jet was barely conscious now thanks to her healing and his regeneration, but he wasn't healing quickly enough.

"Groooooar!" The brutal dragon let out a ferocious roar as it rushed them. Winning this fight by herself would be difficult for Fran.

"Urgh...sorry, Jet!"

"Woof..."

Fran picked him up and put some distance between them and the dragon. She outran it in five minutes, but when she went to heal Jet, she discovered that she was out of resources. Out of mana, yes, but also out of all the potions that Teacher had given her. She couldn't heal Jet completely.

Still, it wasn't her fault. The dragon was a powerhouse of brute strength, but being a dragon, it was also proficient in magic. It possessed Life Magic, a branch of magic with spells that could disrupt a target's healing. Such magic had hit

Jet's leg.

In the end, Jet lost his rear right foot along with his right eye. Perhaps things would've been different if Teacher were around, proficient with magic as he was. For now, Fran and Jet were lucky to escape with their lives.

"I'm so sorry, Jet..."

"Bark, bark!"

"Hm..."

"Woof!"

"Okay. We'll get you to evolve, just you wait."

Even with his injuries, Jet's will to evolve wasn't extinguished. In fact, it felt stronger than before. It wasn't so that he could recover all his lost limbs by evolving. He wanted to evolve so he wouldn't be a burden to his masters after getting injured.

His masters were all he thought about. Such single-minded purpose.

Jet continued to fight harrowing battles. He still looked divine, even after losing a paw and an eye. I couldn't help but identify with him as he fought with and through the pain. Even after the heart of the Evil One started corrupting me, not a day went by that I didn't struggle for the sake of my creator. The foolish Godbeast eventually broke himself trying.

But Jet's circumstances were different from mine. Where I was only following orders as a vassal of the gods, he wanted to fight of his own free will. His motives were purer than mine.

I watched him fight and get hurt, day after day. Thirty days after Jet lost his leg, I couldn't take it anymore.

Sorry, Teacher. This might take time away from your restoration process. But I can no longer sit idly by.

I called out to my vassal.

Jet...you will now evolve.

“Grr...!”

Jet growled at me through gritted teeth. He was already at a sufficient level to evolve, and he knew it. He also knew full well that his efforts had not borne fruit.

At this rate, the little direwolf would evolve into a Darknight Wolf. But Jet had been refusing to evolve this whole time, bottling up the mana within himself.

No one can stop evolution once it is underway, not even I. If he still refused to evolve, the mana inside him would revolt and take his life. I couldn't stand by and watch him do that.

You have another option.

“Grr?”

Take my powers and a new path will be opened to you.

“Woof?!”

But it is a path you will have to tread alone.

I was both a wolf and not a wolf. If Jet took my powers, he would become just like me. He would evolve into a creature never before seen in the world. The only one of his kind. He would never be able to procreate.

He would take the form of a wolf, but surpass category itself, becoming a mutant. Not being a Godbeast, Jet would be truly alone. His own kind would shun him, and not a single one could share his burdens.

Solitude is the price you must pay for power. This isn't the same as being left behind by Teacher and Fran. You will deviate from the path of your own kind and be alone.

“Grr!”

Are you sure of this? This life of solitude for the sake of your masters?

“Woof...”

Then I shall respect your resolve. Receive my strength!

I took a piece of Teacher's powers and bestowed them on Jet. The mana expenditure was significant enough to be a burden on Teacher, but I was sure

that he wouldn't mind. If anything, he would be angry at me if I *didn't* help Jet.

Jet's pent-up mana interacted with my powers, circulating through his body, coating every inch of it. His body was being remade into another species.

"Awoo...grr...!"

Did it hurt? Yes, I'm sure it did. But such was the trial of becoming another species.

"Jet, are you okay?!" Fran shouted with concern. Jet was howling with pain and mana was surging right through him after a fight. The girl couldn't hear my voice. It must look like Jet was self-destructing for some reason unknown to her.

"Jet!"

"Grr..." As for Jet, he stood tall, never once losing consciousness or howling in pain. *Very good, Jet. You wouldn't be able to withstand the trials to come if this was enough to break you!*

"Grrrrr!" Jet continued to take it, for his own sake and to reassure Fran.

Finally...he evolved.

"Awooooo!" A howl broke out over the Demon Wolf's Garden under the moonlit night. It was the cry of a wolf emerging from a cradle. A cry of a new species filled with determination.

His body loomed like a great tree, black and gold streaks of fierce mana rushing through him. The rear right foot and the right eye he'd lost regenerated completely. His thick legs gripped the ground and his sharp features pierced through the darkness. The red spots on his coat became more intense, and there was now a streak of silver down his back, which he wore like a mane.

A new species. One that even I had never seen before.

Jet. You are now a new monster. A Ragnarök Wolf. The other wolves will hate you, and you will stand upon the earth alone. This is the form you chose.

"Woof!"

Good answer.

Jet was far more powerful now, in exchange for that solitude. He would be strong enough to fight alongside Fran and Teacher.

“Jet...? You evolved...?”

“Woof.”

“So cool!”

“Woof!”

That’s it, Fran. Pay him his compliments. That is what he wants in the end.

Okay, here goes.

“Hm!”

“Woof!”

One day after I woke up, we were out looking for monsters in order to see how much we had grown. In my case, there were kinks in my system—which I didn’t even know existed—that got ironed out and fixed.

P.A. had also recovered part of her power. She still couldn’t talk freely, but she could answer whatever questions I had about my body. She could also support me during mana-related activities, making fine control and grand spells easier to execute.

Meanwhile, Fran had been training with Amanda using a sword Aristeia crafted for her.

I looked at the sword in her hand. It was built to withstand Fran’s abuse while also dealing good damage. Aristeia said it was a rush job, but it was still pretty strong.

Name: Refined Enchanted Steel Sword

Attack: 380, MP: 80, Durability: 1200

Mana Conductivity: D-

Rush job, she says...

I guess it was like a drawing made by an artist in five seconds or a dish cooked up by a professional chef out of leftovers. Amazing to everyone but the artist herself.

Hmm.

“What is it, Teacher?”

Nothing...

The length and balance of the blade were tuned so that it would replicate me as much as possible. Which made me feel conflicted.

The sword was definitely of use to Fran. It had protected Fran while I was gone, watched her grow stronger, silently endured her wild fighting style. A fine blade, indeed.

But...I didn't like it. No, let me be frank. I was jealous of this sword. I was jealous of this sword that looked like me that Fran used when I wasn't around.

Imagine. You come back from a long journey and discover that someone just like you is taking care of your family when you come back. Your family even seems to like them! Even if they told you that they missed you, some part of you will never be okay with that. This scenario fit my feelings to a tee.

W-well, I guess we can put away that sword now that I'm here.

“Hm. I haven't fought at full strength in a long time.”

Then fight at full strength you shall!

Fran had definitely gotten stronger. Much stronger. She had the title Big Game Hunter, a title achieved by defeating a gigantic enemy. She didn't know when she got it, but P.A. told me that she got it after killing an Earth Slime which had grown to gigantic proportions after absorbing the ground.

The title gave a boost to her stats when fighting opponents bigger than her. For somebody with Fran's small frame, that was pretty useful stuff.

Her Skill growth was also surprising. Even without Skill Sharing on, she could now use Advanced Sword Mastery and Advanced Sword Arts. Even if she had to

initially use Skill Sharing to level them up, her growth was remarkably fast.

There were several reasons for this. First of all, her natural talent. She also had the ultimate training partner in Amanda. Finally, she spent half a year in the Demon Wolf's Garden, fighting monsters stronger than her. Thus, the stage was set for her EXP farm.

And of course, she possessed the iron will to see her spartan training through.

However, the true fruits of training couldn't be measured by numbers alone. Fran had also sharpened her spellcasting, graduating from brute force to more measured tactics. I could tell after she cast a simple fire spell to set up camp. The flow of mana when she cast it was smooth, and she cast it instantly. Spellcasting took focus and control, even with Instacast. It used to be that she needed to pause for a second in order to cast this spell. That was gone now.

You're so much stronger.

"Hm!"

"Woof!" Jet barked after I praised Fran, reminding me not to forget about him. Standing at over ten meters tall, his voice came from far above me now.

Of course I haven't forgotten about you. You worked really hard, too.

"Bark, bark!"

Jet's evolution was shocking to say the least, maybe even more shocking than Fran's progress. You could say he'd made *HUGE* progress. But his size wasn't the only surprise about him. Fenrir had said that Jet was bound to evolve into either a Gehenna Wolf or Darknight Wolf. He was neither of those.

A Ragnarök Wolf. That was his species now.

He had somehow achieved a special evolution. Identify didn't have details on the Ragnarök Wolf, which reminded me of Fiends...except Jet certainly didn't have the Evil One's blessing.

P.A. said that the Ragnarök Wolf was a completely new species. There was no information about it in the foundation of the world.

Name: Jet

Species: Ragnarök Wolf. Demon Wolf.

Level: 62/99

Life: 1834, Magic: 1910, Strength: 980, Agility: 1274

Skill: Shadow Magic 7, Heightened Senses 10, War Cry 3, Stealth 8, Brute Strength 3, Shadow Warp 3, Shadow Lurk 10, Shadow Walk 10, Fang Arts 9, Fang Mastery 9, Air Hop 8, Frenzy 7, Fear 7, Vigilance 8, Conceal Presence 6, Fast Regeneration 3, Brute Force 10, Regeneration 10, Deadly Venom Magic 4, Malice Sense 6, Malice Resistance 5, Blink 10, Flash Step 4, Hush 6, Abnormal Status Resistance 6, Necromancy 6, Life Sense 10, Mental Resistance 10, Claw Mastery 6, Claw Arts 5, Poison Magic 10, Vigor 5, Echolocation 10, Roar 10, Magic Resistance 6, Mana Drain 5, Nightshade 10, Dark Magic 10, Thunder Resistance 7, Shadow Immunity, Nightvision, Toxic Fang, Enhanced Fur, Regeneration Disruption, Self Recovery, Greater Shapeshift, Poison Immunity, Split Thinking, Berserk, Mana Control.

Unique Skill: Dark Drain, Predator Heal

Extra Skill: Predator Assimilation

Class Skill: Intimidate Kin, Kin Hatred, Seal Immunity

Title: Vassal of the Sword, Vassal of the Godwolf, Lone Beast, Fiend Predator, One Of A Kind

Equipment: Enchanted Godsteel Claws, Dragonsnake Collar

Now *that* was an impressive stat sheet. His stats were vastly increased and his Strength had even broken the 1000 threshold. Jet was now a B-Threat, at least.

He had a lot of new Skills, too. Most of them were advanced forms of preexisting Skills, but there were some unique ones in there.

Normal Skills

Shadow Warp: Advanced form of Shadow Walk.

Regeneration Disruption: Slows down recovery from bite attacks.

Greater Shapeshift: Advanced form of Shapeshift.

Berserk: Goes berserk when driven into a corner.

Unique Skills

Shadow Drain: Partly absorbs incoming dark and shadow spells.

Predator Heal: Recovers health by eating.

Extra Skill

Predator Assimilation: Advanced form of Predator. Takes the powers of one's prey.

Class Skill

Dimension Fang: A fang attack which ignores defense by penetrating dimensions.

Intimidate Kin: Intimidates members of the same and related species unconditionally.

Kin Hatred: Hated by the members of the same and related species.

Seal Immunity: Nullifies seals.

Intimidate Kin and Kin Hatred were the weird ones. They had strange names, worked to Jet's disadvantage, and didn't seem to be the advanced form of any of his preexisting Skills.

Fiend Predator was self-explanatory enough. Jet acquired it after eating enough Fiends. But then there were Lone Beast and One Of A Kind, titles which seemed to be bestowed upon him as consolation for his solitude.

P.A. told me that Fenrir had given Jet some of our powers, allowing him to evolve into a special wolf that surpassed all other wolves.

Jet...

"Arf?"

Jet looked at me with simple eyes. Even looming ten meters tall, he still had the same eyes—ones that held not the slightest hint of loneliness or sadness.

It got me thinking. What if someone learned of my predicament and felt sorry for *me*? What if they said, "It must be lonely for a human to have his soul stuck in a sword."

I wouldn't be happy, that's for sure. That's not what I wanted to hear.

This is awesome! You're crazy strong now, Jet! We'll be relying on you more than ever!

"Hm. So cool."

"Woof!" Jet barked happily when we praised him. He really was a lot like me.

Not so much our personalities, but the way we thought.

Well, we have a lot of training ahead of us. Let's look for something to fight!

"Hm!"

"Woof!"

And so we set off looking for monsters, eager to show off the fruits of our progress to each other...

"Haaa...uh?"

Crap, my timing's all wrong!

"Arf?"

Sorry, Jet.

Only to find that our ability to work as a team was way off now.

We were up against a herd of fanged boars, weak monsters which didn't usually give us trouble. Fran was probably strong enough now to stop an entire herd of them with her little finger...but we'd missed our opening and follow up attacks on the head of the herd.

Fran initiated the attack, but both of us misjudged each other's level of progress. I had taken into account Fran's faster cast speed, but I wasn't expecting her control of the flame spell Vernier to improve so much. She usually needed an extra wind spell and telekinesis in order to stabilize it, but now she could use Vernier to fly in a straight line.

She should've been able to decimate the boar monsters, but unfortunately, I got in the way. I had to. I couldn't just sit by and watch while we were testing our teamwork.

When I saw that Fran was planning to accelerate with Air Hop and flame magic, I helped her out with a wind spell. I also used telekinesis to hold the fanged boars in place.

But my control was much better than I expected. Granted, I put a little bit of extra mana in since it had been a long time since I fought. I thought it wouldn't hurt...

I sure wasn't expecting the result to be several times stronger.

The wind spell was so powerful that it ended up blowing the fanged boars away. Fran insisted on attacking our target, but she ended up decimating the herd in the process. I didn't think Elemental Blade could get so powerful. A single swing from a wind charged Elemental blade was enough to kill three boars. Meanwhile, the two boars behind them were taken down by the sheer wind pressure. The latter was a worse way to go. They were in pain until we finished them off. We definitely needed to be more careful.

Jet dashed for the head of the herd, but their difference in size was enormous. He was liable to squash the boar like a bug before he could show off his powers.

Then, right before our eyes, Jet turned himself smaller. Greater Shapeshift. Before, he could take himself from four meters to one meter. Now, he could take his ten-meter body and go as small as thirty centimeters.

Now the size of a small dog, Jet attacked the fanged boar that I had locked down. He went for the head in order to preserve the rest of the beast's body, but it bounced. My telekinesis had gotten in the way. I had charged it with too much mana. The attack released the boar from my telekinesis, and it started running away. But Jet immediately caught up to it with Shadow Warp and took its head off with a single swipe of his front paw.

Unlike Shadow Walk, Shadow Warp allowed Jet to transport himself to anywhere that had shade. He could even emerge from shadows that would have been too small for Shadow Walk.

Aristea had also provided him with some new equipment.

Name: Enchanted Godsteel Claws

Attack: 480, MP: 250, Durability: 800

Mana Conductivity: B

Skill: Enhanced Size Adjustment

Name: Dragonsnake Collar

Defense: 80 Durability: 600/600

Effects: Item Pouch (Small), Enhanced Size Adjustment

The Godsteel Claws were very similar to Jet's previous weapon, the Captive Claws, the only difference being these were custom-made for him. He lost the ability to paralyze his enemies, but the difference in attack power more than made up for it.

As for the Dragonsnake collar, it was made out of wyrm hide from Amanda's personal stock. It doubled both as a familiar collar and a bridle for Fran to use when riding him.

Both were designed to grow to Jet's maximum size, making them very useful. But Aristeia couldn't imbue his gear with other Skills because of this oddball feature. She barely managed to fit the item pouch on the collar.

Uhh...sorry.

"It's okay."

"Woof!"

I should probably check how strong I am before we start fighting together again.

We then spent some time using our individual powers in battle, teaming up from time to time. I also absorbed the crystals Fran had gathered during my absence, gaining a lot of new Skills and ranking up in the process. She'd gathered over three hundred crystals, after all.

The crystal requirement increased upon ranking up, but there was something strange about it this time. The crystal I absorbed barely counted towards the rank counter. I also didn't get as many Evolution Points as usual. It kind of defeated the point of ranking up.

I asked P.A. about my predicament and she gave me a handy explanation.

Compensation is required due to Fenrir transferring power to Specimen Jet.

What?

Power is redirected to healing Fenrir, causing a loss in EP gain.

Usually, the flow looked like this: absorb crystals → heal Fenrir → gain powers from crystals. But now I couldn't gain as much power from the crystals because Fenrir needed most of it to heal himself after powering up Jet.

How long is it going to be this way?

The problem is likely to persist for two more rank-ups.

Hmm. Well, it's all right, I guess. He used it for Jet's sake, after all.

If anything, I should thank him. Jet only reached his desired power level thanks to the Godbeast. Still...if only I could get rid of Kin Hatred somehow. Too bad Skill Taker couldn't get rid of it; it was a Class Skill, after all.

As for my sudden spike in Skill count, P.A. had it covered. She was managing most of it, reducing the toll it took on me. That being said, I still couldn't be reckless about it.

This altar couldn't be used frequently. Activating it and the subsequent restoration process took up a lot of mana. Even if the Demon Wolf's Garden had an abundant supply of mana, it wasn't limitless.

Can I get points at my next rank-up?

Yes. But there is only an eleven percent chance of getting the projected amount of EP.

So I'm getting nothing?

Eighty nine percent chance of EP being halved.

Half the EP then. That'd be all right. It was actually a cheap price to pay for Jet to evolve. Besides, it wasn't good to want new powers when we hadn't fully utilized the powers we already had. We needed to make the best of our current abilities first.

Teamwork, Skill training, get more crystals. We have our work cut out for us!

"Hm! I'll do my best!"

"Woof!"

1022 crystals to next rank-up.

We've polished our teamwork and we know the extent of each other's abilities. I've sorted out my Skills and spent EP, too, so I can get new Skills.

"Hm."

A month had passed since my awakening and discovery of Fran and Jet's spectacular progress. February had come and was now nearly gone. Today was a special day.

Our training ends tomorrow.

I told Fran and the others at dinner. We were sitting around a campfire next to the pedestal.

I knew Fran wanted to stay in the Demon Wolf's Garden to train. She wanted to get stronger by hunting more monsters, but that wouldn't be good for her. Things would be different if I were alone in the Garden. Holing up somewhere for extended periods of time wouldn't be good for Fran's education, though. Children need to interact with all sorts of people.

Thanks for taking care of Fran for me, Amanda.

"Thanks."

"Woof!"

"Don't worry about it. We're friends, aren't we? Besides, I had a lot of fun and got some great training out of it, too."

Amanda did, in fact, level up, and upped her Skill levels as well. The A Rank had made time in her busy schedule to come here once a week. We owed her a huge favor, and although she told us not to worry about it, we still owed her one.

"Aristea helped me out, too."

"Please. Just think of it as payment in exchange for the information you gave me on the Sword of Mad Faith. Besides, examining you is an experience I can't get anywhere else, Teacher."

But are you sure you don't want us to pay for the gear?

"I am. Besides, Amanda provided all of the materials."

Amanda had, in fact, provided the materials to make Jet's claws and collar, as well as Fran's sword. She had asked the Godsmith to provide for Jet since she believed he could become much stronger.

"Jet was working so hard," Amanda giggled.

"Bark, bark!"

She gently rubbed Jet's back. He was happy to receive compliments from her, too. He'd known her since I first summoned him—she'd even been around to see it.

"If you must pay me back, then carry out the quest I gave you."

"Hm."

You got it.

Aristea had asked us to go to the Academy of Magic in the neighboring country. She made the request over half a year ago, but it was still fresh in my mind. They were looking for a dueling partner, but they might also ask us to do other things while we were there. The Academy's High Elf headmistress was someone Aristea couldn't refuse, and she'd insisted that Aristea find her a candidate for them.

All right...is it tomorrow already?

"Huh? I suppose it is." Aristea responded by taking a pocket watch out of her robe. I wanted one for myself, but apparently it was really expensive. Aristea's own pocket watch had cost several million gold.

Fran, do you know what day it is?

"Hm?"

Nope, guess not.

I wasn't surprised that she had lost all sense of time after training in the haunt for so long.

It's been exactly one year since we met.

“Wow. Already?”

Yeah. How the time flies! I was in sleep mode for half a year, but that still meant I had been with Fran for six months. Sadness, anger, fun, happiness. We had gone through so much together. *You’re so much stronger now.*

“Hm.”

Fran had been a powerless slave when I’d first met her. Still, she never wavered from her path despite all the suffering that came with it. She kept her eyes on the peak and never strayed. Her path was difficult. There were times when she was inches away from death. Yet she carried on, fighting powerful opponents every step of the way.

It all culminated in the Fran standing here today.

It was a deeply moving moment for me, and I was sure that Fran felt the same way. There was a flush on her cheeks as she nodded quietly.

But I was in for a bigger surprise when I identified her.

Huh? Fran, your age... I swear you were twelve this whole time...

She was twelve up until yesterday. Now she was thirteen.

Fran, do you remember when your birthday is?

“Hm? Uhhh.” Fran knitted her eyebrows and tilted her head.

No, she did not. But what kind of miracle would it take for today to be her birthday? Did the very foundations of the world recognize the day Fran regained her name as her new birthday?

She was Nameless before. On this day, she was once again named Fran.

I felt a bit sorry for her parents, but it was better than not having a birthday.

I guess it’s your birthday today, too! That calls for double the celebration!

“Birthday?”

Yeah! You’re thirteen today!

“Really?”

Yep! Happy birthday!

“Hm. Thanks.”

I had prepared a lot of things for our first anniversary, but I didn’t think we’d end up celebrating her birthday, too! *Heh heh heh. Well, I have a surprise for you! Can you guess what it is?*

“A surprise... Pancakes?”

Oh? Good answer! Correct!

“Ooh.” Fran happily clapped her hands. For her, pancakes were reserved for special occasions, which meant they were her first guess. She was already excited. Her cheeks flushed. Pancakes were her other favorite, though they were a different sort of favorite from curry.

Heh heh heh. While you were asleep, I quietly prepared some special pancake batter!

“Special batter!”

Fran’s eyes sparkled upon hearing the magic words. I wasn’t about to betray her expectations, either!

Over the course of the week, I had been quietly preparing the batter, asking Amanda to buy me whatever ingredients weren’t available. The cream topping was ready. All I needed to do now was cook Fran some fresh pancakes.

First of all, I’m going to cook up ten pancakes at the same time just for you, Fran!

“Teacher, that’s awesome!”

Ha ha! I know! I set up ten cooking stations. Ten frying pans over ten fire spells. Ten invisible hands poured batter on each one. Everything was done telekinetically, and it was a cinch now that P.A. was backing me up.

All telekinesis output is within margin of error.

All right, and now for the pièce de résistance!

“That’s so cool, Teacher!”

Ha! Ha! Ha!

Fran clapped harder when she saw me flip the pancakes with the flick of ten

telekinetic wrists. She was drooling, too. Now would be a good time to wipe that off her lips.

And it is complete!

“Wooooow!”

A ten-story pancake tower with ten toppings on the side!

I stacked the pancakes one after another on a plate in front of Fran, finishing the stack off with butter and maple syrup. On a separate platter were bowls of whipped cream, chocolate sauce, and nuts and jams of all kinds. All she needed to do was help herself to however many spoonfuls she wanted.

How’s that!

“It’s amazing! I love it! Can I eat it now?”

Of course! Go for it!

“Hm! I’m going in!” Fran cut into the top pancake and put it in her mouth. “Om nom nom!”

Well?

“Hm!” She merely nodded, but her smile told me I had achieved a perfect score. She quickly stuffed herself with pancakes, and her lips got sticky with maple syrup.

Amanda watched her, smiling, and asked her a question. “Say, Fran?”

“Nom?”

“Which one’s better? Curry or pancake?”

“Hm...?” Fran tilted her head for a while and swallowed. “Curry cheers me up!”

“So you like curry more?”

“But pancakes make me happy! They’re both good in different ways,” said Fran. She resumed eating her pancakes when—

Rumble.

Her stomach rumbled. In the middle of her eating pancakes. It must have

been triggered by her talking about curry. She was now looking at me pleadingly. “Teacher...”

Okay, okay. I'll get you some curry, too. Just for today, all right?

“Hm!” Fran wasn’t usually expressive, but she always smiled whenever she had my cooking. I couldn’t be happier, either.

Of course, I couldn’t let her have whatever she wants all the time. She might get fat if I did. But every once in a while was probably fine...

Chapter 5: New Beginning

ALL RIGHT. *This is the last one.*

“Hm!”

“Woof!”

We’ll finish our training by taking their crystals!

“You got it!”

Fran gave a determined nod, took me in her hands and jumped off Jet’s back.

Our target was the white smoke beneath us...the Greater Venom Gust that had almost killed us when we first got here.

And it wasn’t alone, either. “I’ll get you this time, little girl!”

“Not if I destroy you first.”

“Give it up!” The Wight King was also on the battlefield.

Fran had actually encountered the Wight King several times in the past, but it was always in the vicinity of the Greater Venom Gust. In the end, she’d always have to take on both at a time, exhausting herself before she could take down either until retreat was the only option.

Can you get a read on the Gust’s crystal?

“Hm.”

It was either really well hidden or hidden somewhere far away. This wasn’t going to be an easy fight. *Hmm... We’ll take the Wight King first.*

“Okay.”

Jet, keep his minions busy!

“Grrr!”

This would’ve been a reckless order before. Jet would be going up against

four Wight High Wizards and two Wight Imperial Guards. The most he could've handled was two. But now, this fight was well within his reach.

“Growl!”

“—!”

Jet attacked the high wizards with Dimension Fang after moving in with Shadow Warp. They had the ability to sense Timespace magic, but Shadow Warp was a dark spell. The wights were completely in the dark about that branch of magic.

After a few hit-and-run attacks, Jet started pressuring the wight minions. He jumped around the battlefield, harassing them while changing his size. It wasn't an easy fight, of course. Still, Jet took some stray bullets and heavy damage and that was about it.

His current life, defense, and regenerative abilities enabled him to brush off their attacks. His wounds quickly healed and he immediately got back on his feet to keep the pressure on the wights.

We didn't feel anxious, or like we had to intervene. Jet never fell into the danger zone, and we were able to leave him to it with complete confidence.

“What is that wolf...?!”

“Jet.”

“I did not ask for his name!” snarled the Wight King. “How did he get so strong over such a short time...!”

The elite undead retained some of his human emotions. He was shocked to see the enemy he'd fought on and off over the last six months had gotten so much stronger.

“He trained.”

“Hmph! If training was enough to get that powerful, everyone would do it!”

Fran didn't respond to the Wight King's objection, but just rushed in.

“Th-that's low!”

“Hmph!”

“Urgh! Short Jump!” The Wight King was not to be taken lightly. The caster avoided Fran’s Pressurized Quickdraw by teleporting away, following it up with a frost spell. “Diamond Dust!”

The spell froze everything around him. While not powerful by itself, its freezing range made it a good spell to lock enemies down. Fran would have needed to back off before.

But now Fran charged straight through the blizzard. She used flame and wind spells to force a path through the smoky ice and closed in on the wight.

However, the elite monster was smarter than we thought.

“Muah ha ha! I thought you would pull just such a stunt! Nuoooooh! Blast Avalanche!”

The Wight King had foreseen that Fran might charge a straight path through his spell. The spell he cast summoned an avalanche over the green fields. The tsunami of ice advanced towards Fran, gobbling up everything in its path.

The spell looked strong enough to destroy the walls of a medium-sized fort. What’s more, magical ice was colder than regular ice, giving this avalanche the added threat of frostbite.

Fran only uttered one word in response to the attack.

“Teacher.”

Leave it to me!

She believed—no, she knew—that I could do something about it. It was time for me to do my job.

Haaa! I fired a giant stream of light. But it wasn’t made of Mana Thruster or Flame Magic. I had invested my EP into Light Magic.

This was Solar Ray, a level 6 spell. It fired a laser beam that was truly the apex of light spells. Simply put, it was an anime beam cannon...except it was made of mana instead of photons.

The pillar of light was as thick as a barrel, and it focused on the white tsunami, piercing it. It melted a whole through the avalanche, creating a path for Fran to run through.

I had also used the Invisible Death's Light Dispersion on it in order to increase the beam's power. Even if the wight's avalanche was the same level as my beam, mine was more powerful because of how concentrated it was.

"Gaaah! Such a powerful spell!" The Wight King took a hit from the light spell after it pierced his wall of ice. His magic resistance prevented him from dying, but he was definitely cautious of more incoming spells.

Which meant he was open to back attacks.

Fran didn't let the chance slip from her hands. She ran down the melted path and quickly flanked the undead. "Hmph!"

"Gah...!"

She slashed the Wight King's head off his neck. But he wasn't dead—or rather, he wasn't destroyed. Either way, decapitating him wasn't enough to take out this undead villain.

"I am a Black Bone elite... And to have this little girl decapitate me...!"

"Haaa!"

"Eyaaaargh!" The Wight King let out a death wail like he had been defeated, but he held onto his head with his hands and fell to the ground to dodge Fran's attack.

"He got away!"

Teleportation.

The Wight King had used Long Teleport to save himself after rolling on the ground.

"Over there!" Fran sensed his teleport destination and turned to chase him. But she was stopped in her tracks before she could. The smoke of the Greater Venom Gust had surrounded us.

"Out of the way!" Fran used a wind spell to mitigate it, but it barely worked.

We have to do something about its crystal.

"Should we attack the ground again?"

We still couldn't find the Gust's crystal, even though we were stronger. We knew there was a disturbance in its mana, though. There were parts of the smoke that had intense mana and thin mana. We just couldn't work out where it was. The best we could do was go to where we thought the crystal was and use an area of effect attack.

Jet drew our attention as we mulled this over.

"Bark, bark!"

Do you know where the crystal is?

"Woof!" He looked very confident. His sense of smell was sharper after evolving into a Ragnarök Wolf.

Go get it!

"Awoo!" Jet howled smugly and ran towards the sky. He ran at full speed until he bit into a particular space in the sky.

"Waaaaaeeeeergh!"

A disturbing wail filled the air between us...and then the smoke cleared.

We'd thought the crystal was underground, but it was hidden within the smoke the whole time, probably using a Timespace spell. But it couldn't escape Jet's evolved senses, and Dimension Fang allowed him to bite right across dimensions.

We didn't get the crystal, sure, but he took down a dangerous enemy for us. That was worthy of praise.

Good boy!

"Woof!"

"Very good boy, Jet."

"Woof, woof!" Jet, now a medium-sized dog, expressed pleasure at being petted by Fran. But soon their stern expressions returned.

"The wight's coming back."

"Grrr!"

And he has backup. Lots of it. I sensed hordes of enemy undead near the Wight King. I thought he was one to command a small elite force of undead, but most of his army was of the weak variety. Was he changing tactics?

“Bird skeletons!”

Flying undead incoming!

Bird Skeletons, Bat Zombies, and Lesser Ghosts. The E-and F-Threat undead swarmed towards us.

There were over three hundred zombies, still dressed in the earth they’d been buried under. They raised their bows and fired a hail of arrows at us.

“We’ll scatter them!”

“Grr!”

Leave defense to me!

Fran fearlessly charged towards our enemies. She easily slipped through the storm of arrows into the heart of the horde, taking down zombies as she went.

“Haaaaa!”

“Awooo!”

The undead fired spells and arrows at us without caring about friendly fire, but I deflected them with barriers and telekinesis. I also fired spells at the flying monsters which were attacking us from the sky.

Our enemies were defeated without much resistance, which was a bit of an anticlimax. But then I sensed mana increasing around me.

“Waaaargh!”

“Oooooorh!”

Well, you’re new here!

Fran was now surrounded by freshly summoned zombies; close to fifty of them. Their stats were pretty good and they were well-equipped. Iron armor and shields, with enchanted iron swords thrown into the mix.

“I’ve seen that armor before...”

They're Alessan knights. Or rather, former Alessan Knights. I'd heard that the knights who were caught colluding with Lieutenant August's corruption had been thrown in jail and executed. How the Wight King had gotten their corpses was a mystery.

Then again, we had fight some undead-ified adventurers back in Alessa, so... maybe no one cared about the bodies of prisoners on death row. They probably didn't even notice they were stolen.

Raydoss had been behind the undead adventurers in Alessa. What if the Wight King actually had something to do with Raydoss?

We should ask him.

Yeah, but don't force yourself. Destroying him is still our main goal.

"Hm! I know!" Fran shouted and lunged into the High Zombies.

"Hyaaa!"

"Oooooogh!"

"Strong, but weak!"

Yeah! They're no match for us!

These zombies were stronger than the average undead but small fry for us. Especially when compared to the three faced zombie we fought in Alessa.

We plowed through the horde and eventually made it to the Wight King, but he seemed relaxed somehow.

"Hee hee hee! You're here!"

"This time, you're dead!" shouted Fran.

There was a ring around the Wight King's neck that almost looked like a choker. It was the spot where Fran had decapitated him earlier, and it hadn't healed completely.

The Wight King knew that Fran had the advantage at close range, so why did he seem so confident? I had a bad feeling about this. A chill went up my spine, a reflex from my human days. Fran felt the same thing.

She stopped midway and jumped back.

A white aura immediately engulfed the Wight King and his surroundings. Everything it touched turned into white ice. The aura broke out like a tsunami, freezing all of the Wight King's minions.

The green plains of the Garden now looked like the top of a glacier.

Was it a frost spell? I hadn't heard him cast it.

"Mwahahaha! So much power!"

"He got stronger all of a sudden!"

Come on, is powering up the latest trend for undead or something?

The Wight King's mana felt different now. It was far stronger than before.

"Hee hee hee! Today, you will die!"

Fran jumped further away from the Wight King, who now wore a maniacal grin. A murderous aura practically dripped from his hunched form. Fran's movements grew a lot more cautious.

The Wight King was transforming now, dull thumps resounding all over his body. He wasn't just healing himself. His bones were extending, the flesh under his robes swelling. He actually got to the point where his robes couldn't contain his expanded flesh.

His arms and legs, which looked like withered branches before, were now so muscular that they looked like the limbs of a high ogre. His pants were filled to bursting, making them look like leggings instead.

The Wight King wasn't just getting bigger, either. Faces sprouted from his body, from his right shoulder, from his solar plexus, and from his left side...yeah, I knew this kind of creature. The memory was so fresh that you couldn't even call it déjà vu. He looked like the three-faced zombie we'd fought half a year ago in the basements of Alessa. He had an extra face on his stomach, sure, but it was basically the same.

I also noticed something even more shocking.

The face on the Wight King's stomach made me yelp. *That face...!*

Someone you know, Teacher?

Wait, you don't remember?

Hm?

The face on his stomach! Look!

Uhh...

R-right. Well, I guess there's no use remembering that kind of man.

Who?

Fran had forgotten, but the face belonged to August Allsand, that rotten baron. Former owner of Essence of Falsehood, former lieutenant of the Alessan knights, and all-around scum of the earth.

He'd been banished after offending a member of the royal family and we hadn't known what happened to him, other than assuming he'd get his title stripped after being involved with Marquis Olmes' rebellion. Apparently, his corpse had been secretly stolen by a Raydossian necromancer.

"AAAARGH!" The face on his stomach howled in anger.

"Mwahahaha! It seems you hold a grudge against the girl!" The Wight King laughed. It looked like August had retained some of his ability to think.

"Kill, kill!"

"Pathetic man! To think your feeble mind could still hold such resentment! But not to worry. I will put your rotten mind to good use! Pitiful undead! Let me feed upon your grudges!" the Wight King roared. He lifted his hands to the sky, and the undead surrounding him stopped and turned into dust.

Had he really just annihilated his own army? Fran seemed just as confused as I was.

"Kuhahaha! I know that these undead have no chance of stopping you! That is why I am feeding on them!" Black energy gathered around the Wight King. It was still mana, but of a ghastly sort. But it wasn't Malice, either.

Still, I recognized this energy. We had seen the same thing back on the sky isle.

Grudge. The lich's power source. He had summoned these undead to absorb

their grudges because they ran more on grudges than on mana. The Wight King's presence became still fiercer.

"Any last words?"

"Are you Raydoss' undead?"

"Mwahaha! I suppose I can tell as a parting gift. Indeed! I am Iceman! Sixth Seat of the Black Bones, the most powerful squadron among the forces of Raydoss!" the Wight King—Iceman—boasted.

I had no idea what a Sixth Seat was, so I didn't know how powerful that made him. "Black Bones? Are you a squad of necromancers?"

"No, you fool! We have no need of human sorcerers! We are undead that retain our intellect! The strongest force in the world!"

That explained it. You could organize a squad of undead if they could thought and felt like Iceman did. But a whole squadron of elite undead? The name Black Bones suggested they were a special unit.

"What's a Raydossian unit doing here?"

"Mwahaha! To investigate this mysterious haunt, of course! This land is where the legendary Fenrir is said to rest! My intellect compels me!"

Necromancers could take advantage of Fenrir's bones if they found them. No wonder the Black Bones had an interest in the Garden.

"But I'm stuck here because of that blasted forest!"

"How'd you get in?" asked Fran.

I was curious about that, too. To the undead, the mana-draining Withering Forest was a death sentence. Even an elite undead like him wouldn't last ten minutes in the woods.

"I created a mountain of ice and slid down it with my coffin! It flew through the air, and I teleported many times before finally landing in these plains!"

Coffin. Like the ones back in Alessa? Yeah, those things would be able to shield the undead from the effects of the Withering Forest. He effectively did a ski jump off an improvised ramp and rapidly teleported through the air before

the forest could drain his mana.

“Kuhahaha! You will have to kill me if you wish to know more!”

“I can’t interrogate you if you’re dead.”

“Kuhyahyaha! A brilliant observation!” As Iceman started cackling, he unleashed an aura even whiter and colder than before. The moment that white mist touched grass, it froze and shattered. No living thing could survive such cold.

The subzero air exploded, and I quickly warped us out of its vicinity. We looked down at the dome of white death Iceman had made for himself. Try as we might to get a visual on him, the dome shimmered with the naturally-occurring brilliance of Diamond Dust.

“Teacher, Jet—we’re going to cut him down.”

Got it.

“Woof!”

The white fog had yet to clear, but that also meant that our enemy couldn’t see us. Fran was right. This was our chance to strike.

“Jet, it’s time for *that*.”

“A-arf?”

“Don’t worry. We can do this.”

“W-woof, woof!”

W-wait! By that, do you mean that?

“Hm.”

The *that* Fran and Jet were talking about was a new ultimate attack they had been working on. Fran had come up with it after seeing Feeler and Shell’s gatecrashing technique back in the capital. It had been an impressive feat: the mercenaries used their comrades as footing to propel themselves to the sky, ending with the grasshopper Hobbes kicking Robin the lobster to crush their target. A difficult technique, but destructive when done properly.

Fran would use the same principle to enhance the strength of her Aerial

Pressurized Quickdraw.

I couldn't agree with it. *It's too dangerous! You haven't pulled it off yet!*

"We'll be fine! Come on, Jet!"

"Grr!"

Damn it!

Fran and Jet took their positions despite my complaints.

Hold on! This is a really bad idea! They still couldn't pull off the technique consistently. Practice makes perfect, but I really thought that an ordinary Aerial Pressurized Quickdraw would be enough here...

Still, I probably wasn't going to talk to them out of it. Jet was already in position. The best I could do was watch from the sidelines.

"Groooar!" Jet grew gigantic and brought his front paws down on Fran's back. It would be a deadly attack if it landed, and her back was clearly exposed.

Fran used Air Hop to shift herself a hundred and eighty degrees in the air. She was upside down now; her head at the bottom, her feet on top. She lightly tucked her legs as she felt Jet's feet coming, then kicked against his great paws, using his power to accelerate through the air.

But their timing was off.

"Ow!"

Fran!

"W-woof!"

She'd been late setting up the barrier. He'd kicked her too soon.

What was supposed to be an impact-driven speed boost turned into Fran getting hit by a regular attack. She was now hurtling towards the ground in a tailspin, blood spurting from her mouth, leaving a red trail in the air. Her left leg was twisted, and the impact on her back caused her to vomit up blood and bile.

I'll warp you out—

No! He'll notice if you do! We have to commit!

Fran gripped my hilt harder to show her determination. She had enough speed for sure. She just needed to run through the air with Air Hop to unleash a regular Aerial Pressurized Quickdraw.

I wanted to pull her out, but there's no arguing with Fran once she made up her mind.

Then at least switch from training mode to battle mode!

We'll be fine!

You took so much damage that you can't even talk, but...all right! I'll back you up so just focus on getting Aerial Pressurized Quickdraw out!

Hm! Fran spat out the blood that was pooling in her mouth and reaffirmed her posture. She then accelerated through the air, using all the Skills and spells she had, into Iceman's white dome.

I opened a path through the freezing mist with telekinesis.

There he is!

"Haaaa!"

But just as Fran was about to launch her attack, I felt a chill run down my spine. I didn't know why or how, but I knew that something bad was about to happen.

Iceman grinned.

And I immediately knew what he was up to. He had predicted our every move. The white aura wasn't just cold air, it had his mana mixed in. Even if he couldn't see us, he could use the aura to feel our position. When I opened a path with telekinesis, our position was immediately exposed.

"Ungh!"

"Haaah!"

Knowing that it was too late to pull out, Fran unleashed her quickdraw early. Iceman weaved out of the way like a seasoned martial artist, evading her sharp blade. The only damage he took was a minor cut on his shoulder, and he followed up the attack with a backhand strike.

Fran managed to teleport out at the last second, but his fist had grazed her arm.

“Urgh...!”

Her left arm turned frozen white. A crack was running down its length. She didn’t feel pain because her arm had been frozen to the core, but the attack would’ve been fatal had it landed elsewhere.

Iceman laughed, watching her cradle her arm. “Muah ha hah! You’re fast but I can still see you!”

Aerial Pressurized Quickdraw had never been so perfectly defeated. We had only been using it on slow, gigantic enemies so far. Against an enemy with agility and awareness, Pressurized Quickdraw was easily countered.

“Now it’s my turn, girl! DIE!”

“In your dreams!”

“Grr!”

Iceman clenched his fists and stepped quickly towards us. The faces on his body began to groan. It was a haunting noise, as if they were casting a curse...

“Ooooooh!”

“Aaaaah!”

“Uuuuuh!”

They were each casting their own spells. August couldn’t use magic back when he was alive, but he was undead now. Looked like his Skills got a little upgrade.

Each spell was powerful in its own right. Countless ice spears rained from the sky. An ice vine slithered toward us like a snake to its prey. An ice dragon emerged from behind us to seal us in. All elite level spells.

But even this full-on attack wasn’t the Iceman’s real goal. He used these attacks to cover for himself as he approached us. He was always in the back lines before but with his current body, he could fight just as well on the front.

“Now DIE!”

What now, Fran?!

Cover me, Teacher. We'll take him down.

Fran still wanted to defeat Iceman with her own hands. She was frustrated that the Aerial Pressurized Quickdraw she'd orchestrated with Jet had failed. They'd been battling the Wight King for half a year now—he was like a rival to them.

Roger that! Are you sure you wanna stay in training mode, though?

"Hm. We'll put an end to our training by beating him!"

Fine. I'm going to intervene if things get too dangerous, though, so you better win by a mile!

"Hm! Come on, Jet."

"Woof!"

I started casting spells to cover for Fran, melting and deflecting the enemy's frost magic with flame spells and telekinesis.

Iceman was within striking distance by now. Adjusting to his movements were difficult considering how slow he was before. He was too fast!

But not too fast for Fran after her hard training. The Iceman brought his fist down on her. She twisted herself out of its way and immediately struck back—she'd clearly seen his attack coming.

At that moment, Jet emerged from the shadows with a surprise attack. He grew larger and clamped his jaws on the Iceman's leg like a gigantic bear trap.

We got him!

Of course, he wasn't about to go down so easily. The Iceman teleported away, evading Jet's attack.

He can use Timespace Magic without an incantation?!

The Iceman's cast speed was so fast that it rivaled mine. Meanwhile, Fran had seen through his attack and was following it up with her own. She knew that there was a chance her surprise attack wouldn't finish him off, so she was saving her energy. She was a lot calmer about the Iceman's strength than I was.

“Haaaa!” Fran cried.

“Nuoooh!” the Iceman snarled.

Fran emerged out of Jet’s shadow cloaked in black lightning and slashed at the Iceman, firing a thunder spell from the opposite side as a simple feint.

Most opponents wouldn’t be able to react to Fran’s attack if she concealed her presence. But the Iceman swung his fist at his blind spot, right where Fran was attacking from.

Her feint had failed but Fran pressed on. She thought that I’d win the clash between me and the Iceman’s fist. Even / thought I would cut right through him.

CLANG!

But our weapons clashed and remained still.

His fist was covered with magical ice which I couldn’t cut through. The Iceman looked just as shocked as we were, having expected his fist to shatter Fran’s sword.

Although both were frustrated, neither fell back.

“Nuoooooh!”

“Hiyaaaaaah!”

Fran and the Iceman glared at each other, continuing their offense without backing down.

Violent winds blew as the Iceman’s fists crashed at Fran’s defense. The sound of air being cut could be heard in the small dome when Fran slashed at her enemy. A single direct hit would crown the victor, but the combatants could merely graze each other.

The battle was so intense that Jet couldn’t come near it.

August and the other faces were dumbfounded. They couldn’t afford to carelessly cast spells.

The stalemate continued until the balance suddenly shifted.

“Mwahaha! Come now, what’s the matter?”

The undead didn't need to breathe. He could continue his offense indefinitely. Fran, on the other hand, was alive and capable of getting worn out. His lack of breathing also made the Iceman more difficult to read.

"Argh!"

The Iceman's fist finally made contact with Fran. Icicles had extended from his hands, and he could control their length as he pleased. "Tsk! Not deep enough!"

Fran barely avoided getting stabbed by it. She quickly jumped back to minimize the damage, but the razor-sharp icicle had pierced her belly.

"Gaaah!"

I pulled the icicle out with telekinesis and healed her back to full health. A few seconds too late and it would've penetrated her insides and froze them.

But worse than the physical damage was the psychological damage the attack dealt. She should've been stronger now after all that training, but the Iceman had still bested her in melee combat. I could hear her grind her teeth.

"Hngh...!" She gave the Iceman a death stare. An ordinary person would've died of shock from the sheer murderous intent of that gaze, but the Iceman just laughed it off.

"How does it feel to lose at your favorite game? That art of close combat?"

"I haven't lost yet."

"Tell yourself what you wish!"

"I haven't lost yet!" Fran shouted, holding me up.

Fran. The Iceman is a tough opponent. You know we can't beat him while holding back.

Hm...I'm sorry.

Don't worry about it. But this marks the end of our training. I'm shifting you to battle mode.

Hm! Fran waved me around to get a feel for me again before rushing at the Iceman.

“It’s no use!” he laughed. He thought that she was falling apart, and it might have seemed that way. But I didn’t stop her. Fran was no longer the Fran that was fighting a few seconds ago.

The Iceman saw through her movements and swung.

And then Fran kicked the ground beneath her and accelerated.

The Iceman was visibly confused. He expected her to move with the speed she had been moving with so far. His timing was thrown completely off.

Having dodged the Iceman’s attempt at countering her, Fran cut right through him.

“Huuurgh!” He swung his remaining left fist at her but Fran was long gone by then.

She turned back and smirked, “There. Now we’re even.”

“Urgh! You cocky little brat!” Now it was the Iceman’s turn to grind his teeth in frustration. His lost arm was already regenerating, bubbling back to replace the one he had lost. His ego was reeling too; Fran had repaid him for their earlier exchange. He took out his anger on the right arm lying on the ground, crushing it with his foot.

Fran might have seemed to have gained a sudden speed boost, but that wasn’t quite right. The fact was, she’d been slowing herself down. When she entered the final phase of training in the Demon Wolf’s Garden, she asked me to weigh her down with land magic. All of her battles thus far had been fought with this limitation.

Fran treated fighting the Iceman as another part of her training, which was why she insisted on keeping the land spell on. But having realized that she couldn’t defeat him in training mode, I took off the spell, allowing her to regain her speed.

Y’know those scenes in shounen manga where the heroes drop their weighted clothing and get way faster? And the villains are all “Wh-what?! These wristbands...they weigh a ton!” It was pretty much that.

“TIME FOR YOU TO DIE!”

The Iceman charged at us. His ego insisted that he beat Fran at close range, but this was her battle now. Not only could she use her real speed, but she had adjusted to *his* speed.

She was also figuring out the effective range of his fists. She'd space him out, using Vernier and Mana Thruster to shift her momentum at will. The Iceman couldn't land a hit on her while she was chipping him out. He tried the icicles on her again, but she had seen that trick before and knew how to handle it.

The battle was suddenly one-sided.

"Urgh! Get back here! Why can't I hit you?!"

"You won't get me again."

"Raaaagh!" The Iceman knew that persisting in this range would kill him.

He unleashed another burst of white aura and teleported away from Fran.

"Little girl...!" His dark eye sockets glowed red with rage.

"I win."

"Hmph! I-I have always been a mage from the start! It is obvious that I cannot win a physical exchange!"

"Sore loser."

"Yaaaargh! I'll kill you for that!" The Iceman roared in anger and swung his right arm. The white aura came at Fran like a tsunami.

Round three had officially begun. Unlike last time, it was going to be a long-distance fight.

"I'll turn you into an ice sculpture and shatter you to pieces!" The Iceman thrust his arms forward, sending a hail of white aura bullets at us. Meanwhile, the three faces started casting freezing spells.

We were casting spells of our own to resist the onslaught. Fran cast her thunder spells, Jet his dark spells, and I used flame. Together, we beat back the avalanche of frost spells bearing down upon us.

A prism of colors broke out over the plains as steam and smoke obstructed our view. Still we continued to cast magic, using Presence Sense and Mana

Sense to lead the way.

This went on for a good minute until the heads ran out of spells and thunder struck the Iceman. Even if they had more heads casting spells, we were able to cast multiples of ours. I deflected any spells coming Fran's way so she and Jet could focus on attacking. Eventually, our attacks had broken through.

"Raaaagh! How? How am I losing?!" The Iceman was screaming in frustration after teleporting away, absolutely ripping his hair out. Here he was, convinced that his victory was guaranteed after that little power up, but Fran had defeated him at both close and long range combat. His frustration was understandable.

Then the Iceman took something out of his robe. I guess it must have had an item box function in it.

It was a flask. Perfect and pristine.

"That flask."

Yeah. It's the one we saw in Alessa.

The mysterious flask that was inside the stomach of the three-faced zombie. They looked similar, but this one was more elegant. The container itself was also emitting mana.

"I've already taken more than the safe dosage of the prototype evolution drug...but victory demands sacrifice!" Iceman held the flask up high and crushed it. The fluid it contained ran down his arm, drenching his whole body.

No ingestion. I guess skin contact was enough for the stuff to work.

"Hee hee hee hee! I can feel it! No wonder it costs as much as a small country!"

The Iceman's mana became even more terrifying. It was bad before, but now it was giving Fran goosebumps. It was as intimidating as the lich on the sky isle. While the power surging forth from the Iceman didn't surpass the lich's might, it might've been close.

"Aooooorgh...raaaaagh!" The Iceman's roar shook the air of the Garden. Even though his size remained the same, it felt like a dragon had entered the scene.

“Offer me your flesh and blood!”

“I refuse!”

The Iceman lunged at us with a sudden burst of speed. He was much faster than he was before. In fact, he might be even faster than Fran with Flashing Thunderclap on.

Fran, I'm going to have to be at full strength to handle this!

“Hm!”

“Woof!”

August and the other faces also got powered up. They were now able to cast frost spells even within the high-speed melee.

But we were getting serious, too.

I continuously used dimension magic, well aware that I was going to be worn out by the end of it. But thanks to my memory of the gods being awakened, I could now feel the help of their blessings more readily.

Chaos God's Grace allowed me to recognize myself as a sword more than before. My affinity for the system made by the goddess was increased. The blessing allowed me to imbue more mana into my blade.

Wisdom God's Grace increased my control of Skills and magic. I could use more of them at the same time with even more force.

I accelerated time with dimension magic, supporting Fran with spells in her fierce melee. I could feel my control ability being pushed to the brink.

Before, this kind of exertion would've caused that mysterious pain to trigger, but no more. I still had my limits, but I wasn't even close to them.

“Freeze, you insolent fly!”

“How about you go back to your coffin!”

The Iceman's fists were wrapped in the white aura. Every time he punched them, he sent a freezing wave a hundred meters long. The trees around us froze, making them look like icicles in a glacier. The air was now white with cold.

Meanwhile, Fran's weapon crackled with black lightning. She was much better

at controlling it after her training. It clashed with the Iceman's powerful frost spells, more than capable of fending them off.

Bit by bit, the black lightning beat back the white aura, preventing the Iceman from gaining ground. Before, Fran wouldn't have been able to resist the power of the cold and would be forced to retreat. That, or she'd need to use every trick in the book to get past him.

Our battle against the Iceman, now more powerful than a B-Threat, continued. Fran calmly scanned for an opening, but remaining in this standstill for long would be dangerous. The Iceman still had the upper hand when it came to stamina and regeneration. Fran dealt more damage now with Sword King Mastery, but she still couldn't finish him off.

But Fran remained calm and watched the Iceman's movements. Finally, the time came.

"Nuooooogh!" The Iceman tried breaking the stalemate by launching a powerful attack. He wasn't sure he could win a DPS race. He unleashed white aura from his whole body in an attempt to freeze his surroundings.

Fran answered it with the flame spell she'd been charging. Cold clashed with flame, creating a powerful shock wave and an explosion of steam. The massive amount of mana that went into both spells caused a storm of mana to rush through the air...

A situation that Fran had been waiting for. The mana and wind disrupted the white aura, dulling the Iceman's senses. Her attacks would be much more difficult to anticipate now.

Teacher!

Right!

We both teleported, taking ourselves high to the sky. This would be our second aerial pressurized quickdraw for today.

"Jet!"

"Woof!" Jet would also be involved in this attempt. The blue light which usually enveloped me and Fran now enveloped him, too. His bond as a vassal

was made stronger through evolution.

Strangely enough, I knew that this was going to work.

Our current condition was different from our usual Sword And Flesh. Jet was connected to us now.

Specimen Fran's status has changed from Contract (Sword And Flesh) to Contract (Trinity).

I knew it! Our bond with Jet is much stronger now! There's no way we can lose!

"Haaaaa!"

"Grooooooar!"

Gooooo!

It was the perfect attack. Fran planted her feet perfectly beneath Jet's paws and absorbed his momentum. Now she hurtled towards the ground like a meteor. She was not running now but falling, but she nevertheless managed to control her ridiculous speed.

This time for sure! I thought as I charged my blade with mana. *I can see it!*

I identified the Iceman's shadow and mana behind the veil of white steam. He noticed us coming for him, but it didn't matter. Not anymore. By the time he realized what was happening, Fran had already slashed at him.

Iceman twisted his way out of the attack, narrowly avoiding certain death. His right arm was cut off at the shoulder, and with it, one of his faces. Yet still that powerful undead tried to attack us. I wasn't sure if we could cut him down, but I definitely wasn't expecting him to fight back!

I was still taken aback by the Iceman's tactics when Fran wrapped her body in black lightning, disappeared...

...and reappeared behind him with lightning speed.

Black Lightning Strike. A move that could only be accessed through Unleash Potential before, but no longer. After training, Fran could now use it as she wished as long as she could concentrate.

Usually, I'd pull us out with a Timespace spell after an aerial pressurized quickdraw. We didn't have a way to avoid things on the ground.

Now, Fran did it all by herself.

"Huh?!" Surprised though he was, the Iceman didn't freeze like a deer in headlights. He immediately responded by teleporting behind Fran. "Oooh, you scared me there!"

Iceman had finished preparing for his killer strike as Fran was still in the middle of her attack. The white aura on his left arm started whirling like a hurricane, snatching pebbles from the ground, freezing and shattering them to pieces. A direct hit from that hailstorm would tear Fran to pieces.

That is, if he could *land* that hailstorm.

Just as Iceman was about to fire, Jet leaped out of the shadows.

"Grrrrr!"

"Ugh!"

After completing his role as a catapult, he had retreated into the shadows, waiting for a chance to strike. But just as he was about to be crushed under Jet's paw, Iceman disappeared.

He's Instacasting teleports!

Despite my panic, I found myself using short-term teleport unconsciously. It wasn't entirely of my own will; being linked with Fran, the Timespace spell was what she wanted. The blue light linking us allowed us to understand what the other wanted. Jet was in on it too, now. That's how he managed to land his ambush with perfect timing.

"Bwuh-huhhh?!" The Iceman was so shocked that he made a sound like a cartoon character. He'd just escaped our attack, and here Fran was in front of him again.

"Sword God Form."

Ooooooh!

And now, Sword God Form.

Unlike before, Fran was much calmer while emitting a fierce aura. I could feel power going through my blade. The divine element...an element accessible only in Sword God Form.

If there'd been blood flowing in the Wight King's veins, it would've drained from his face at the sight of our transformation. He instinctively knew that he wouldn't be able to take our next attack.

My senses were so heightened now that I could tell what he was going to do next. He was gathering mana in order to teleport a third time. But he wasn't going to make it. Iceman had already used his Instacast on Black Lightning Strike *and* Jet's ambush. He needed just a moment longer to concentrate and use that spell again.

A moment he didn't have.

This was why Jet had attacked him earlier. Fran had the Iceman dancing to her tune.

She brought her sword down on the enemy with the force of the Sword God, barely dashing through him with great economy. Her speed was so fast that she didn't make a sound. Her blade didn't even whip through the air.



By the time I noticed, the Iceman was already split in two.

“Aah...?” The Iceman seemed just as surprised. There was a line going down his body from his left shoulder to his right side. His body followed the line and fell apart. Then he finally understood that he had been done in.

“Argh...gyaaaaaaah!” A scream. “M-my powers...why can’t I heal...?! Hrggggh!”

He couldn’t regenerate after being cut with the divine element. Mana started gushing out of his wounds like a geyser.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!”

As the Iceman was in his death throes, I met August’s gaze. The face on the stomach moved his lips, but the diagonal cut prevented him from forming words.

A strange feeling came over me at the sight of those shocked and cloudy eyes...but this was the end of our story with August Allsand.

“Impossible... I...am supposed to be immortal!”

The Iceman splayed out on the ground, gazing at the sky. His body withered at an extraordinary rate...but as his muscles shrank, his mana grew.

“If I’m going to die... I won’t die alone...!”

He was going to self-destruct.

Not that it was going to work against us. We’d already teleported ourselves far away.

“Oh...” The possibility of his enemies escaping had never occurred to him. Here was a Wight King lying at death’s door, and suddenly he found his once-sharp mind clouded.

“Aaaaaaaah! Whyyyyyyyy!”

And that was the end of Iceman.

The explosion was powerful, I guess, but we were nowhere near it. To us, the blast was only a breeze that ruffled Fran’s bangs. Iceman had been an opponent that could’ve actually beaten us, but the way he went out was nothing short of

dumb.

Still, Fran and Jet were more than satisfied.

“We did it...!”

“Woof!

They celebrated their victory with a high five.

Things didn't go quite as planned, but this marks the end of our training!

“Hm!”

“Woof!”

Epilogue

“SO WHAT ARE YOU going to do now, Fran?” asked Amanda.

“Hmm. Teacher?”

Let me think.

After defeating Fran’s mortal enemy, Iceman, we regrouped with Amanda and Aristea. We didn’t really have anything we needed to do, though there was a lot we *wanted* to do.

Personally, I want to go check out Aristea’s request. That dueling instructor thing. It sounds interesting.

I was more interested in the schools of this world than the quest itself.

Fran’s ultimate goal was dispelling the curse placed on the Black Cat Tribe. She had put off going to school in order to achieve that goal. She probably thought it was too late to start attending.

Still, I thought spending time with kids her age was very important for her. Maybe she would want to go to school once she knew what it was like. I certainly wanted her to go. Not that I was going to push it on her, but I wasn’t going to oppose her if she said she wanted to attend.

In order to get to that point, though, she would first have to go to school.

“I wanna check it out, too.”

Oh? Really? Did Fran secretly want to go to school?

Her interest in the school lay elsewhere, however. “Hm. I want to meet a high elf.”

I see.

“They’re the strongest race in the world. I’m interested.”

Always thinking about combat before anything else, huh? But if Fran wanted to go to the Academy, we had a destination.

We’re off to the Academy of Magic in Belioth for us, I guess.

“Hm.”

“I’ll give you a letter of introduction. It should keep you from having to wait for days to see Winalene,” said Aristeia.

Is Winalene the high elf we’re meeting?

“Yes. She is the headmistress of the Academy of Magic.”

A few days just to see her. Aristeia made it sound like Winalene was on the level of nobility...

“The Academy is recognized as an independent power, after all. Winalene is like a viscount in that respect. You won’t see her without an introduction.”

And I thought being headmistress of a magic academy was a big enough accomplishment. Then again, she had to be very important if she held that title *and* was among the strongest magic-users in the world.

“What’s she like?”

“Well...she’s very amicable. Friendly, even. But her outlandish behavior sometimes throws her surroundings into confusion. She doesn’t mean anything bad by it, though. She’s just a little strange. You have nothing to worry about.”

I’m not sure if that’s true. A high elf who threw her surroundings into confusion without any ill will sounded like bad news to me.

“I understand. But she is a good person at heart. She has been headmistress of the Academy for centuries and is venerated everywhere. Although, ah...I suppose more people hate her than love her...”

Can you please not end with something distressing?!

I don’t feel like going anymore now.

“Oh, don’t be that way. Are you still interested, Fran?”

“Hm. Your high elf friend sounds fun. I’d like to see her.”

“You heard the girl.”

Ugh. Well, if Fran wanted to see her, nothing I could do about that. *Fine...*

That meant we needed to cross the border. How would we go about doing

that? I asked Amanda, and apparently the B-Rank adventurer card would have us covered.

“Security has gotten tighter because of what’s been going on with Raydoss, so I highly suggest going through a border checkpoint.”

“Okay.”

Are there walls there?

“No, but the government will keep track of your immigration records. You need to be careful these days.”

I guess things might get messy if Fran got asked for some ID and she wasn’t logged in the immigration records.

“I would love to come with you,” Aristeia began, “but...”

I thought you finished looking into Fanatix.

“Not quite. There’s still the investigation regarding the former Marquis Aschtner.”

Aristeia was going through Aschtner’s remaining documents with the help of Garrus and a team of investigators. I thought that any papers concerning a Godsword would be kept under lock and key by the kingdom, but the king had worked out an agreement.

Are you sure you can tell the king about your identity? King Granzell wasn’t laid back like the Beast King. Conspiracies and forcefulness weren’t out of the question if there was something that he wanted.

Amanda reassured us that wasn’t the case.

“Don’t worry. Garrus arranged her meeting with the king. And if you think about it, he definitely doesn’t want to make enemies of a world-renowned blacksmith and a Godsmith. Especially not under current circumstances. Besides, governments don’t tend to try anything funny with Godsmiths.”

“Why’s that?”

“You never know what manatech they might be packing or who might be backing them. They won’t brag about it, but your average Godsmith has ties to

a number of kingdoms and renowned adventurers.”

Abducting a Godsmith would make a kingdom the enemy of several other states.

“At the moment, Solving the Fanatix problem is Granzell’s top priority. Chaos would happen again if a copy of it was ever made. They’re going to need me, at least until things settle down.”

“So there you have it,” added Amanda. “I’m going to start name-dropping Aristeia from now on, too. Just to make sure they get the point.”

Granzell definitely wouldn’t want to get on Amanda’s bad side by hurting Aristeia.

“Basically, don’t worry about me.”

“Hm. All right.” Fran nodded, then bowed deeply to the two women. “Amanda, Aristeia, thank you for everything.”

Her tone was as flat as ever, but I knew that Fran meant what she said with every fiber of her being. An A Rank adventurer and a Godsmith were some of the busiest people in the world. Yet they had gone out of their way to be with her during her training. Fran knew how fortunate she was.

“I enjoyed myself too, you know,” said Amanda. “There were a lot of exciting moments. Thank you, Fran.”

“And I should be thanking you for letting me inspect Teacher,” said Aristeia.

Amanda and Aristeia gave her bittersweet smiles. They knew that this was goodbye, for now.

“I had so much fun.”

“Me too.”

Fran gave them a bright smile. She got on Jet’s back, who was now the size of a horse.

“Come see us again,” said Fran.

“Of course,” said Amanda.

“I’ll go to the Magic Academy once I’m done with the investigation,” said

Aristea.

“Hm. I’ll be waiting for you.”

This parting was different from the ones before. Fran usually had to hold back her sadness, but not this time. She had gotten used to saying goodbye to Aristea and Amanda over the course of half a year. You could say she’d gotten a lot of practice saying goodbye.

But she also knew that she was going to see them again. She knew that their parting would be temporary.

“Teacher, Jet, let’s go!”

You got it! See you around, Amanda! Aristea!

“Bark, bark!”

“Bye-bye, you two!”

Afterword

AS ALWAYS, THANK YOU for your purchase. It has been a while since my last afterword.

Like I mentioned last time, I'm not very good at writing afterwords, but I still need to fill for space. Time for me to stall again.

"Oh, he is so incompetent!"

"Indeed! How many times must this writer make the same mistake before he learns!"

"Wait! This is—"

"What is it, good madam?"

"The writer is using us to fill his pages again!"

"The knave!"

"We last appeared in volume seven and this is all we do!"

"Cease this nonsense! Let us appear in the main story, too!"

"Noooo!"

No, seriously. I have nothing to write!

Anyway, that was the Page Adjusting Ladies, who got quite the response last time.

I quite like them, and I enjoy writing them.

They will certainly appear in future afterwords.

Now that I'm done stalling, some words of gratitude.

My editor, I-san: Thank you for always taking care of me. You're a great help.

Llo-sama, thank you for the great illustrations. As usual, they turned out great.

Thank you, Maruyama-sensei, for drawing the manga. Amazing work as always.

Thank you to my friends and family, to everyone involved in the printing process, and—last but not least—thank you, Dear Readers. Thank you for everything.

The anime is currently in production. I don't have much to contribute, but I know there are a lot of great creators working on it to make it an amazing show.

It's going to be great, so watch it when it comes out!

READ ME <<<<<<<
RIGHT-TO-LEFT

EXTRA CHAPTER

Flight Attendant Fran

STORY: Yuu Tanaka

ART: Tomowo Maruyama

WHOOSH—...

I'VE BEEN
WONDERING
IF WE
COULD
MAKE
MONEY
FROM
FLYING JET
AROUND.

HELLO,
MY
NAME IS
TEACHER,
AND I'M
A DAY-
DREAMER.

WE
COULD
CALL IT
JET
AIRLINES...
OR...
JET
AIRWAYS?

AND FRAN
COULD BE
THE FLIGHT
ATTENDANT!

SHE'LL
BE CUTE
AND
POPULAR!

JUST
IMAGINE
HER
ASKING
YOU,
"FISH OR
BEEF?"

HO
HO
HO





MY... WHAT
BUTT A FINE
of BUTT...
course,
I must
touch
it.

AND
EVERY
FLIGHT IS
BOUND TO
HAVE THAT
CREEP
WHO'S
GOING TO
TRY TO
GROPE
HER
BUTT.



『KANA
KAMUY!』

ARF
?!



MWAHAHA!
KANA KAMUY!

THIS
HERE'S A
HIJACK!



YOU
KNOW...
I NEVER
DID TRAVEL
BY PLANE
MUCH...

What
I know,
I picked
up from
anime and
manga...

END



Slash
or ash
for
you,
sir?

SHE'LL
PROBABLY
BE MORE OF
A FIGHT
ATTENDANT
THAN FLIGHT
ATTENDANT...

...



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